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SPACE ADVENTURES

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THE ISLAND OF SPACE
by August Derleth

THE GRAY LEGIONS
by Mallory Storm

ON SOME DISTANT STAR
by Charles Creighton

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by H. B. Hickey

THE ULTIMATE PERIL
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"Nine and Twenty Moons"

★ By KAY BENNETT ★

Our Solar System's strange and fascinating satellites

THE Solar System has more to it than planets. An intra-galactic visitor to our system would find his greatest surprise in the strangely large number of satellites that our system possesses. Up until a couple of months ago the system held *twenty-eight* moons—now, with the discovery of another and fifth satellite of the planet Uranus, the number has jumped.

If nothing else, the discoverers of the satellites have given them nice romantic names. Saturn's satellites are named (in order of distance from the mother planet), Nimas, Enceladus, Tethys, Dione, Rhea, Titan, Hyperion, Iapetus, and Phoebe: Uranus' are named, Ariel, Umbriel, Titania, Oberon, and the new one as yet unnamed: Neptune's, Triton: Earth's, Moon: Mars', Phobos and Deimos: Jupiter's, Io, Europa, Ganymede, Callistó and the rest unnamed. This is an imposing list of lesser planets which in effect are what moons are.

It is generally believed that the majority of the moons are much like our own, insofar as they do not possess any atmosphere that we can detect. Titan is an exception as are some of the moons of Jupiter. Of course this is highly speculative and may someday be knocked into a cocked hat by the ones who make the trip to them—and that will come.

There are many curiosities about the moons that are interesting to consider. The satellites of Uranus, for example, unlike those of any other planet, rotate about the mother-planet at *right angles* to the plane of the ecliptic. This is highly irregular, and there seems to be no logical reason for them to do so, at least if certain aspects of cosmological theory are considered. A list of the discoverers of all the moons in the system would be of purely historical interest.

Over three hundred and thirty-eight years, outside of our own Moon, none of these celestial objects were known. Then pioneer Galileo turned his feeble telescope to the skies, to the planet Jupiter and clearly spotted the four major satellites! The pinpoints of light that he saw moved during nightly observations, confirming his belief that they were satellites.

If you have never gazed through a telescope during a warm summer evening at the planet Jupiter, and have never seen those dots of light, you have not lived.

Most of us have looked at the Moon at one time or another; we have seen the craters and the plains, the dead-sea beds and the mountains, and have been duly impressed. But to look at the moons of Jupiter through even a low-powered telescope brings a thrill that almost defies description. Actually there is not a great deal to be seen; it's not like looking at the Moon where everything is so clearly outlined and so near. But looking at the four major satellites of Jupiter is a more terrific thrill in that you are particularly aided by your mind's eye—your imagination.

First you see very clearly the round bulk of massive Jupiter, and perhaps, if the scope is steady enough you see the bands and striations that encircle it—maybe even the "spot." As you watch more attentively and your eye becomes more acutely tuned to the seeing, you see the little specks of light to the sides of the planet. They may be near or far away from it, depending on the time of the year. You may not see all four, but whatever is visible, is magnificent! A little voice in the back of your mind, whispers, "you are peering into the depths of space, you are seeing sights undreamt of. Can you imagine yourself out *there*, actually visiting those satellites whose feeble beams of reflected sunlight come to you now?"

As impressive, is a glimpse, not through photographs, but through an actual telescope held in your hand, of the rings of Saturn. This too is incredible. A man's imagination is staggered by the sight. It makes one realize one's insignificance and yet it affirms our belief in the fact that after all is said and done, *we are* the observers. Your mind goes hog-wild with speculation at the sights. There is nothing like practical astronomy to serve as inspiration.

Our Earth and its Moon have maintained a singular distinction. In fact, it is not correct to regard the Moon as a satellite. Because it is so huge and such a big part, comparatively speaking, of our planet, we may think of it as another planet unto itself. Astronomers, mathematically speaking, always think and speak of the Moon-Earth system as a "double-planet" system. Dynamically the two behave that way and hence offer sufficient justification for it.

The end is not yet. Who knows what other moons may be discovered. Because many of them are so small, it may take time, but it is likely that as more and more astronomical plates are examined, more and more dots will be located and we can say—the solar system has another moon!

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IMAGINATIVE TALES ON OTHER PLANETS

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Front cover painting by Robert Gibson Jones, illustrating a scene from "The Ultimate Peril."

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THE ULTIMATE PERIL

By Robert Abernathy

In this vicious war between worlds, Earth's enemy put to use the strangest weapon of all: an involuntary traitor!

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THE *Sheneb* was five thousand tons, built in Venusian yards as a copy, line for line, of an Earth cargo carrier. As such she had served her first few years, driving crewless between Venus and its colonies on the outer worlds.

Now she was converted. Lusterless black, absorbent not only to light but also to far longer wave lengths, hid her magnesium skin, and an atomic blast gun peered threateningly from an airless swivel turret built clumsily into her once clean-cut nose. That was for war.

For her present purpose there were other changes. The cargo decks had been stripped of all equipment and

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sealed off by partitions from the engine and control rooms forward. That was to protect the Venusian crew from the poisonous oxygen breathed by the prisoners in the hold.

After thirty hours in space, twenty-six under zero acceleration, the cargo decks were uninhabitable. But men, women and children still clung to life there, a tangle of bodies helplessly adrift in the fetid air. The Venusians had provided little ventilation, no light, and no waste disposal mechanism, which last was a peculiar horror in the weightlessness.

But perhaps worst of all was the darkness. It denied them the little comfort of seeing other human faces in their hell. And in the darkness no one could count the living and the dead. And if, floating in that black pit, you bumped against a rigid body, it was not worth the effort to find out whether the stiffness was that of death or the cramped rigidity of space sickness—not the nausea that had wrenched most of the prisoners in the first hours, but the other space sickness that was worse—zero neurosis, free-fall hysteria, any names there are for the primitive terror of falling, falling endlessly into blackness for more than an Earth day now. Very few knew how to take that sensation; many gasped and fought for a support that was not there and lapsed at last into a paralysis of fear.

Not long after acceleration had ceased, the word was passed round that Favreau, Ambassador of All the Nations, was dead. That might mean something in interplanetary politics—but here he was only one of many dead.

A woman's voice, a girl's by the sound of it, was sobbing and talking through sobs, trying to rouse someone named Jim—and failing.

Another voice interrupted her, speaking almost in Ralph Degnan's ear: "Better let him be. If it's zero neurosis, he may be luckier than we are." Degnan recognized the voice as that of the doctor who had tried to calm and help during those first hours of darkness and crushing acceleration and terror. The doctor went on, explaining quietly, as if he were in the clinic, "In that condition blood is drawn away from the brain. It helps combat the derangement of blood pressure in free fall, that may bring on cerebral hemorrhage. Zero neurosis may be a survival mechanism."

"Survival?" The girl-voice caught up the word, and laughed with a surprising, bitter energy. "I've been praying for the deflectors to fail when a meteor comes in our path."

The conversation, so close and yet invisible, irritated Ralph Degnan's raw nerves in ways he didn't stop to analyze. He said savagely, "If you've got to pray, who don't you make it for an Earth warship? And dammit, doc—you don't have to be scared, to live in free fall."

IN THE silence, Degnan could hear unhurried breathing close beside him. He sensed that the doctor was trying to see him, studying the tones of his voice.

Finally, the steady voice said, "Perhaps you're not afraid, my friend. I'm sure I am, both of *now* and when I try to imagine life in a prison on Neptune... But I think you're upheld by another emotion that has much the same physiological effects as fear. Anger, or hate."

"I'm waiting," said Degnan flatly. "The Venusians never make a mistake—they think. They and their 'total mentality'. I'm waiting."

"There's no chance here."

"Maybe on Neptune, if that *is* where they're taking us."

The girl's voice came out of the

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blackness, sounding frightened, uncertain. "Who are you? I don't think you're one of us."

"Who's 'us'?"

"Most of the people here," explained the doctor, "are from the colony at Ghrup Shiyap. Attached to the embassy there, as I was. Even when we heard—we hoped we'd have some diplomatic immunity. Maybe we do—they haven't killed us outright."

"I was a clerk in the embassy. I got the job to be with Jim—my brother." The girl's voice shivered. "There wasn't any warning. Only a radio flash—and then they came for us—"

"I believe," said the doctor soberly, "that all the Earth people on Venus were rounded up within an hour of the first news of fighting. The Over Race is efficient."

"They were even more efficient in my case." The others couldn't see Degnan's twisted grin. "They put the finger on me two weeks ago. I didn't know the war had begun until they shoved me on board this ship."

"We don't know much more. It was reported that a Venusian cruiser fired at installations on the Moon, that Callisto was bombarded by Earth ships. No major engagements."

"There will be," said Degnan with grim confidence. "After what they've done, Venus is at war with every country on Earth. That makes the odds in first-class battleships alone better than thirty to their one—and in manpower, if you can call theirs that, still better. We'll smash them."

"I hope you're right," said the doctor, a queer doubtful note in his voice.

The girl asked hesitantly, "Where were you? Before they arrested you, I mean."

"In the Gray Barrens near Ghrup Unur," said Degnan. "Trading with the Under Race... Those are Venusians a man can deal with. Their minds work like ours."

The doctor remarked unemotionally, "Our captors would say that's because we're savages, too."

DEGNAN said nothing. His hatred of the Venusian Over Race was too deep and too precious to waste in words. But the stifled sound that did escape him must have been expressive, for the girl spoke in a new voice, rich with pity: "They must have hurt you terribly. I don't see how anybody could live through two weeks of being their prisoner."

It was like running into something sharp and hard in the enfolding blackness. It jarred the fierce intent anger out of him and left him feeling hollow and weak.

He said shakily, "I don't know. I don't remember what they did to me." His eyes stared into the darkness until he saw points and darts of light that weren't there.

"What's the matter?" inquired the doctor's even voice.

"Twelve days," muttered Degnan hoarsely. "I'm sure of that, anyway. That long between the time they grabbed me and when they put me aboard... But I don't know what happened in those twelve days."

"That's not unusual, you know. Frequently the mind rejects a memory that's too painful."

Degnan didn't answer. He was groping, trying to sound out the frightening abyss that had suddenly opened in his own mind, his own memory.

"Whatever you've forgotten is over and done," the doctor reminded him gently.

Degnan shook his head to clear it; said between his teeth, "Sure. That's right. What matters now is getting out of this, back to Earth—"

He stopped, jolted by the loudness

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of his own voice. The darkness of the hold had grown suddenly denser with the death-stillness around. The weary murmur of voices, the fainter rustle of movement, had stopped as if everyone had become stone.

And it seemed to Degnan that he had seen a faint light flicker and vanish, but had thought it a trick of his eyes. The next moment he knew it had been real, as a chilly sibilance, like a snake's sound, cut through the silence and came nearer.

He caught an eye-stinging whiff of formaldehyde. There were gasps of hard-held human breath, and the sighing hiss of the propulsion tubes attached to the Venusian's body as it moved purposefully among the helplessly floating, b l i n d Earth people. It could see, no doubt, if only dimly by infra-red in the stifling-hot hold.

DEGNAN knew by the stench that the creature was hanging very near him, motionless, for the hissing had ceased. Perhaps it was watching him and no other, with those great sightless-looking eyes whose glittering reflections under light would seem an empty fire of hell....

He almost screamed, and twisted convulsively like a hooked fish—which for all practical purposes he was, for a fang of hot metal had bitten through his shirt and skin at the meeting of shoulder and neck. He felt the barb grate against his collarbone and pain came flooding as he was yanked into motion through the air. Then he was drifting free again—and a hard invisible wall collided v i o l e n t l y with him. He scrabbled at it, seeking a hold that would let him launch himself at the enemy he could not see, and the effort thrust him away from the wall to dangle helplessly in the blackness where there was no up, no down, nor any way at all, and he did not know whether the smarting in his eyes was from tears of rage or from the creature's formaldehyde reek.

Someone whimpered like a trapped animal, and Degnan collided again—this time with something soft and moving, another human. They embraced one another by common consent, with the blind need to grasp at a stay in the spinning void. Then Degnan knew that the other was a woman; he felt her strangled sobbing and heard it in his ear, and by that sound was sure it was the girl he had been talking to a few moments ago.

"Steady," he muttered foolishly. "Maybe it won't—"

Something blunt and hard punched him breathtakingly between the shoulder-blades, and lights danced before his eyes. Some of the light persisted until he knew it was really there. The Venusian had propelled the two of them, still clinging together, through an opening door into a communication shaft, and there was dim red light in the shaft, enough that Degnan could see and reach out to snatch at the handholds fixed inside it—

He was thrust sickeningly, painfully away. They drifted along the tube toward brighter light, and as their bodies turned slowly in air, Degnan saw the Venusian following. Its hunched leggy form—which, if it had been far, far smaller, scuttling round and round in a kitchen sink, would have been merely disgusting—differed not at all from that of the Under Race, with some of whose members Degnan had talked and traded and almost made friends. But the huge compound eyes, that gave it three hundred and sixty degrees of vision, gleamed with the bale-fires of a dreadful intelligence. Or perhaps you only thought you saw in those

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eyes what you knew was behind them: the total mentality of the Over Race, which might be called superhuman with as much or as little justice as man's mind could be called supercanine...

It had a long-hafted goad like an elephant man's hook, with which it prodded them impatiently once more. It must be uncomfortable here. The air in the shaft was muggy-hot and stifling with formaldehyde gas, but it was humanly endurable, which meant that the Venusian, save for its breathing apparatus and the complicated protective garment that sheathed most of it, would have died in it almost equally fast from oxygen poisoning and from freezing.

There was something funny—the Venusians had gone to the trouble of exhausting their own air from this part of the ship and replacing it with something like Earth-normal. They must have some very special motive for fishing two living humans out of the hold. Degnan's flesh crawled when he tried to guess the reasons they could have.

THE MONSTER behind thrust them forward again, and they drifted out of the communication shaft into a room—forward of the ship, Degnan judged by its size, and lighted with the murky red glow that was all human eyes could register of what for Venusians was a brilliant illumination.

There were two more Over Beings here, afloat side by side, watching. Degnan knew more about Venusians than most men, but he couldn't read their expressions—his experience among the Under Race didn't help him there; these creatures were as different in mind from their poor relations as they were in body from man. But he recognized the insignia one of them wore as those of a high officer in the Venusian fleet—surprisingly high to be aboard this miserable cargo shell. Both of them were armed, and Degnan's other thoughts were lost in the craving to get his hands on one of those weapons.

He saw something else that made his heart bound with illogical hope. At four places around the red-lit chamber's periphery the wall bulged smoothly inward, and an airseal door was inset into each curve. Those, on this model of ship, marked the berths where emergency rockets, provisioned and fueled, were carried when a crew was aboard... And one of those doors was standing open, more red light glowing beyond.

The madness of the idea didn't occur to Degnan then. He twisted and got his first look at the girl he was holding and who held to him. Her face floated before—above, below?—him, ghost-pale in the bloody light, darkly haloed by hair that drifted in wild weightless disorder. As he had half-expected from her terrified rigidity, her eyes were wide, dilated, unseeing. He tried briefly to pry one of her hands loose from his arm, and knew he would have to break her fingers first.

She had to be jarred out of it, and that inside seconds. Already he could hear the hissing of the third Venusian's air-tubes, emerging from the shaft.

Degnan clenched his teeth and slapped the girl's face; her panic grip loosened, and he caught her by the shoulders and shook her till he was afraid her neck would snap. But he saw her lips move, the pupils of her eyes return to normal size, and he whispered sharply, "Do you hear me?"

She nodded dazedly. The Venusian that had brought them out of the hold was hovering close, barbed goad

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poised; the red chamber was turning slowly about them. Degnan whispered, "There's one chance. When I say 'Go!', we'll shove off in opposite *directions. Action and reaction. You* try to occupy the one there; I'll take the two on the other side."

She drew a shuddering breath, said, "All right." He was thankful she didn't add what they both knew—that the chance was no chance at all.

"Get ready, then," said Degnan harshly. They braced themselves against each other and waited for their slow rotation to bring them into position...

The high-ranking Venusian floated into Degnan's field of vision with a soft hissing. One of its almost-hands of delicate claws and flattened pads was extended, holding something that gleamed and that Degnan recognized—too late, a fractional instant before it exploded into blinding light.

The flare was literally blinding; when it vanished he could see only confused darkness. He had met it before, when he was seized, and knew it for one of the Over Race's clever new devices for dealing with Earthmen—*one harmless to themselves*, since it used light invisible to Venusians. But there was something funny about this time. The darkness didn't stay on and slowly clear up, but he stay on and slowly clear up, but he and shadow, seemed to be plunging into concentrically smaller circles of buzzing nothingness, himself dwindling away to nothing, losing consciousness....

THE RED light burned once more. The air was murk-red, close and stuffy, and something somewhere was going "Blip...blip. Blip...blip," in a curious paired rhythm.

And someone was shaking him by the shoulders, almost in time to the noises. Degnan snorted, gulped down a sudden sickness, and sat up, looking into the face of the dark-haired girl.

"Turn about's fair play," he said dizzily, "but you can stop now."

She drew back, *gazing at him with* intense relief. "Thank heavens! Now maybe you can do something."

Degnan threw his legs over the edge of the bunk he had been lying on and stared blurrily at gleaming dials and instruments set into an opposite wall, very close and curving. He passed a hand across his eyes. "Do—what?"

"Find out where we're going—and —and do something about it."

The man's head was clearing. Now he became aware of the low monotonous rumble of a rocket drive; that, and the cramped quarters, and the red light, told him where they were. But once oriented, he only felt more bewildered. They were in an emergency rocket from the Venusian freighter, and it was under power.

The girl was watching him as if expecting him to produce a rabbit from a nonexistent hat. Her hair, still tangled, hung normally about her face now—one Venus gravity would *be the acceleration of the lifeboat*—and the traces of hysteria were gone. She was as rumpled and soiled as Degnan; she was thin, and her face with its bright expectant eyes held shadow-smudges of suffering. And for all that she reminded him somehow of Athalie—Athalie far away and dear, a part of the pleasant dream that life on Earth seemed now. But Athalie was blonde and richly curved, and he had never seen her other than immaculately clean, sweet-smelling, well-groomed....

He heaved himself shakily erect, glancing round the interior of the rocket. Half of it was bunks, uncomfortable but endurable for man or Venusian, three of them, one above the other; the other half was filled

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by an instrument panel with another bunk above that. The blipping came from the panel and went on and on maddeningly.

The controls he saw were odd-shaped, made for Venusian claws, but mostly recognizable; few and simple compared to those of a regular space ship. The rocket was not equipped for complex navigation or sightseeing; there were no vision devices, no calculator.

"That noise," Degnan said over his shoulder, "is a radar echo. This type of boat has an elementary pilot mechanism that automatically heads for the nearest planet-sized body. It's bouncing a beam off the nearest planet—listen." The thing went 'Blip ...blip.' The interval is the time it takes for the echo to get back. Twice the distance to the planet in light-time. Which means it's pretty close. If it's Earth, we'd be inside the Moon's orbit."

"If it's— Do you think it's *Earth*?"

"Yes," said Degnan deliberately. "That's the likeliest—considering how long the *Sheneb* accelerated and how long we were in free flight, we could hardly have been close to anything else. It couldn't very well be Mars, and Mercury's beyond the Sun..."

"Earth!" the girl said in a choked voice. She watched him with puzzled eyes as he turned away and sat down heavily on the bunk's edge again. "But—aren't you going to—"

"—do something?" Degnan shrugged ironically. "The robot's steering on the radar-sight, and I couldn't do any better. There should be an automatic parachute-release, too, when we hit atmosphere—but we won't need that. Earth's at war now, and nothing bigger than a pebble could slip past the interceptor barrage. We ought to be picked up before long."

"Oh," sighed the girl.

"Now," said Degnan, "let's you tell *me* something. What happened? How'd we get here?"

She looked at him blankly. "Why—we got away—didn't we?"

"We were about to try. But I didn't duck in time."

"Oh, yes—your plan." She smiled uncertainly, a frown puckering her brows. "Evidently it worked."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Degnan rudely. "We both must have passed out."

HE THOUGHT hard, aching head in his hands. And cloudy pictures rose in his brain—memories, or half-memories, plucked with difficulty out of emptiness. Himself, wresting the steel-tipped goad from the Venusian's grip—battering at the others with it, smashing a chitinous head. A couple of jointed legs afloat in the air and twitching gruesomely. Thrusting the girl through the open door, diving after her. Launching the lifeboat into space....

In clipped syllables he imparted those fragments to the girl as they occurred to him, and she nodded thoughtfully. "Yes. Yes, that's the way it was."

Degnan flexed his right arm and tested the muscles of his back likewise. He said, "I'm stiff and sore enough to have been in a fight. And if we both remember it, it must be so. But neither of us remembers very clearly—isn't that right? In other words, something smells!"

"You know what the doctor said about memories."

"Uh-huh. We forget unpleasant things." Degnan smiled grimly. "But

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if I really smashed up three Over Racers—that's a pleasure I'd never forget. And I'd feel good now—but I don't. That bothers me, too." The girl gazed at him helplessly. Degnan grinned with sudden abandon. "The answer I can think of—I must be a dual personality, and one of me's a superman. That's the only way we could have got away like that; we didn't have the chance of a snowball in hell."

He got restlessly to his feet, paced the cramped space of the rocket's cabin. His last sharp-etched memory was of that greater red-lit chamber aboard the *Sheneb*, the watching monsters, the blinding light. Beyond that everything was fuzzy, even now that they had compared notes. And something else was eluding him. Something was wrong about here and now, about this ship.

He turned sharply on the girl. "Look—what are we breathing here?"

She stared wide-eyed and said without conviction, "Air."

"Obviously. But where's it coming from?"

"The aerator. I knew enough to check that, before you came to."

"Yeah, sure," said Degnan softly. "But that's a Venusian aerator. It should be turning out formaldehyde—not oxygen. Furthermore, the temperature here's about thirty degrees Centigrade, where a Venusian thermostat should be holding it at a hundred."

She bit her lip. "Then—the Venusians must have fixed it that way. On purpose."

Degnan looked at her with a surprised new respect. "Go on," he urged. "Develop that thought."

"I—can't," she faltered. "I don't see *why*."

"Neither do I," said Degnan blackly, and resumed his pacing. "But so help me, I'm going to."

The girl gazed at him with veiled intentness. She saw a rough-hewn face masked now by two weeks' growth of crisp black beard—that must have got its swarthiness from an admixture of American Indian blood, whence also high cheekbones, and a thin, determined mouth that might under the wrong conditions be cruel. It was not the face of a man accustomed to be baffled long.

"Yes," she murmured, "I think you will."

IT WAS less than an hour later when the radarscope changed its note abruptly and emitted sharp staccato sounds that, translated from interplanetary code, were a peremptory "Heave to!"

Degnan had made a note of the rocket control; he shut the power off and, floating weightless once more, sought for and found a two-way radio. He tuned it, and brought in a hard-boiled voice, speaking English with a Latin accent, which said it was the Chilean battle cruiser *O'Higgins*, and ordered, "No funny tricks. You are covered, *senores cucarachas!*"

With fervent persuasiveness, Degnan explained that they were not cockroaches, they were human. The voice sounded unconvinced, then half-convinced—all the same, a booby-trap expert must board them before they could be picked up by the cruiser.

"That," Degnan admitted, "is a sound idea."

The girl caught her breath. "Do you think this ship is a trap with us for bait? That would explain—"

"If in a few minutes we get blown to atoms," said Degnan levelly, "it'll

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just about explain everything."

But after some fifteen minutes the lifeboat, pronounced safe as inspection could make it, was engulfed by a huge lading lock in the cruiser's side.

Aboard the *O'Higgins* there was gravity again—naturally, since the cruiser had, like all modern warships and very few other vessels, a full gravitic drive, which meant that its acceleration was limited not by human capacity to endure but by its power plant's ability to give out, and that it could spiral faster than an ordinary ship could travel a straight line.

Degnan, bedraggled, unshaven and red-eyed, clambered out of the lifeboat's airlock and confronted a brown smooth-faced little man immaculately glittering in uniform.

"I am Menendez, *capitan de la Armada del Espacio*. And who are you, who come to us under circumstances so peculiar?"

"Ralph Degnan's my name; better make a note of it," said Degnan curtly. "The two of us have just left the custody of our friends the cockroaches; we couldn't be choosy about the circumstances. Ex-freighter *Sheneb*, apparently heading toward Neptune..." He glanced sidelong at the girl; she looked ready to faint now that rescue was an accomplished fact, and was making futile absent-minded efforts to repair her face and costume, without seeming to pay attention to what was being said. Nevertheless, he switched to Spanish, becoming more polite in obedience to the form of the language: "If Your Honor pleases, I will request that he land me at the city of Los Angeles."

Captain Menendez raised a startled eyebrow. He said stiffly, "We land at Valparaiso, six days from now."

"*Es preciso*." Degnan's eyes bored steadily into the other's. "If Your Honor will check my identity with North American Military Intelligence..."

The captain was startled again, with the other eyebrow. He recovered himself. "Very well. By all means, *senor* Degnan. And while the check is being made, with what may I serve..."

"*Un bano*!" said Degnan prayerfully.

A BATH and shave achieved in the cramped facilities of a cabin in officers' quarters, and the food he was brought devoured, Degnan lit the first luxurious cigarette in two weeks and thought briefly of the dark-haired girl—mostly of how little he knew about her. He didn't know who or what she was—or even whether that was important.

What was important—a gnawing feeling told him—was the confusion in his own memory. The enemy had done that, somehow; on Venus, Degnan knew, psychology was the mother of sciences, like physics on Earth, and they had had plenty of chance to study the human mind, which they considered so inferior to their own.

It was so vivid, that glimpse of a Venusian like a smashed bug sprawling in midair, a couple of detached legs jerking. Vivid, but somehow it lacked the essential stuff of reality. It fed without appeasing his bitter hatred of the Over Race.

He couldn't say just why he hated them so intensely. It was a feeling scarcely connected with what he, personally, had suffered; the best reason he could think of was his instinctive sense of their abnormality, some monstrousness about them wholly apart from their unhuman

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form. In a sense, the dominant species of Venus was an artificial product; they didn't come normally from eggs like the Under Race, but out of the hot spawning beds where forcing and selection kept the recessive mutation that had created them alive.

Degnan shook his head angrily. The Venusians couldn't have made him a tool in any fantastic scheme they might have for getting behind Earth's defenses. That left the lifeboat—which some time ago had been cast off into space, headed back toward Venus with jammed controls. And the girl: was she Number One? She looked like only an unhappy young woman who had been an inconspicuous clerk until caught in the vortex of interplanetary war, who was as innocent as her story...which could be checked easily, of course.

He wouldn't have to worry about her any more. Unless—which was unlikely—they ordered him to when he reported in Los Angeles. He lit a second—or was it a third?—cigarette, and tried to let the smoke sooth away his trick memories and the all-too-real recollection of the black and crimson hell on the *Sheneb*.

A knock at the cabin door, and an orderly was there, saying respectfully: *"El capitan le atiende."*

Captain Menendez was affable. "It is impossible for the *O'Higgins* to leave her patrol, Colonel Degnan—but a North American liaison vessel will come alongside to take you off and to Los Angeles. That will be before very many minutes now. Your Intelligence was delighted to hear that one of their agents had escaped the claws of the Venusians. *Y es verdaderamente un milagro, no?*"

"A miracle—yes," admitted Degnan with gloomy reserve. That was just what was bothering him so much.

Menendez looked puzzled; he said severely, "You are more lucky than you know. I have received a dispatch about the ship that you escaped from—a freighter, was it not, of a type like our M3s?" Degnan nodded.

"Then it can be no other. It tried to run away, and the warship that had ordered it to stop was forced to open fire."

"And the people—the Earth people on it?" asked Degnan with stiff lips.

The captain shrugged. "Of course their presence was not known," he said apologetically, then brightened: "But you see how effective is the Patrol. If the *cucarachas* come close enough to look at our Earth—one pounce and we are on them!" He glanced round him, swelling a little, and Degnan sensed the little man's proud confidence in the steel length and strength of his great ship, its power and its armaments that could lay waste to a whole planet's surface. The Venusians too had ships like this, but not as many as the United Nations of Earth; and in the tremendous battleships, compared to which a mere cruiser was a mosquito, they were hopelessly outnumbered.

"Tell me," said Degnan, "how has the war gone? Where I've been, there wasn't any news."

Menendez shrugged again. "Nor have we heard much. In the last days our forces have occupied Neptune and the Venusian moons of Jupiter and Saturn, but that was a trifling affair; they had been evacuated already. So far we are defensive; we guard ourselves and prepare. Of course," he tried to look knowing. "I cannot tell you the plans of the Combined Fleets. But one thing I tell you: this war will not be long."

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"I hope you're right," said Degnan, then realized that he was repeating the doubtful words of the doctor on the *Sheneb*.

"Oh, yes—one more business. Do you wish that the *senorita* be sent to Earth with you? She is of your nation."

With an effort, Degnan brought his attention back to that problem. "She'll have questions to answer, I think—" He stopped short. "Yes, send her along."

ON THE SHORT trip to Earth, Degnan scarcely noticed the girl or anyone else; he was greedily wrapped up in studying a Los Angeles newspaper, borrowed from the lieutenant in command of the courier vessel.

He was somehow disappointed by his first real glimpse of Earth's reaction to the interplanetary war that was only nine days old. There were many columns of "war news" but very little news. A feature article on the interceptor barrage which made Earth a fortress, and which was claimed—it seemed to Degnan not very convincingly—to be far superior to that with which Venus had surrounded itself. On the front page in boldface type a noncommittal communique from the new Combined Fleet Headquarters, Somewhere on Earth. Elsewhere, articles that hinted nebulously at the plans for a tremendous offensive being perfected by the world's best military and scientific brains at that hidden base, whose location was secret lest the enemy concentrate some desperate, all-out thrust on it...

Degnan snorted, smelling a rat. He knew that there was no need to figure out an attack strategy now; the plans for offensive action against Venus under all conceivable circumstances had been ready and on file for years as a matter of simple precaution, ready to be put into effect at any moment.

Still scanning the paper, he did not notice that the messenger-boat had landed until a crewman touched his shoulder. As he rose, he saw that the port was already open and the girl had disappeared. It struck him suddenly that he had never learned her name; he scowled and told himself to forget it.

It was a sunny afternoon and the sky of Earth was blue. Outside Los Angeles Spaceport he halted on the sidewalk and blinked, almost overwhelmed by the actuality of swarming human life that went on under the shadow of Venusian war.

Gleaming traffic flowed swiftly by, with Los Angeles traffic's traditional disregard for life and limb. The people who crowded the streets in the sunlight wore holiday faces, filled with social gaiety or smug relaxation or petty clinging worries. Among them, the frequency of uniforms, soldiers and spacemen, showed that times were something more or less than normal. But not one of them looked toward the sky in either fear or defiance.

Beside the gateway was a poster, displaying a hideous and inaccurate painting of a Venusian, its prehensile paws upraised in an unnatural pouncing pose. The caption was screamingly funny. It said: EXTERMINATORS WANTED. ENLIST TODAY!

Degnan stared at it with a curious sense of distaste. There was such a vast difference between this cartoon bogey and the reality of forty million living monsters on Venus who planned and worked coolly, pur-

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posefully, with all the power of their alien, total minds, to shatter and end the carefree world of man...

A MAN WAS standing at his elbow, thoughtfully watching him. Degnan turned deliberately, a chill question ready in his eyes; but that evaporated as he met a familiar face. "Jay Marlin!"

The other grinned easily. "That's right. They told me to shepherd the stray lamb back to headquarters. You look like you need an escort, too—sort of lost."

Degnan nodded slowly, fumbling for words. "I feel like a stranger here, someway. I must have expected...oh, hell, I don't know."

Jay's smile grew quizzically sympathetic. "You must have been through the mill, Ralph. But that's why General Fleming is so anxious to see you. You're the only man who was on Venus when the war began and who got back to tell us about it."

A plain maroon sedan was waiting. Degnan sank into its cushions with a sigh of disbelief.

He said lamely, "I've not had time to get a report ready."

"You're to make it verbally to the General himself. I told you he was anxious."

Degnan was silent. It came to him like a dash of ice water that he could report exactly nothing on the period of time they would be most interested in. Did he detect, lurking behind Jay Marlin's unchanged friendliness, just the faintest note of watchful distrust? They would be justified in holding him in suspicion. He was forced to suspect himself, so long as that torturing twelve-day blank defied him, held its secrets though his hands clenched involuntarily and the blood pounded in his ears with the effort to remember...

"Sorry," he said absently. "What'd you say?"

"I said," repeated Jay," "we're there."

THE LEATHER-BROWN face of General Fleming, district chief of NAMI, was covered by a crossing, branching and interlacing system of deep wrinkles, which, as the shrewd mind behind them chose, could be amiable, stern, persuasive, ferocious or impenetrable. The General wore his impenetrable look as he listened to Ralph Degnan's tale.

At last he said, "Is that all?"

"All I can remember," said Degnan steadily. "As I indicated—it's quite possible I've forgotten something important."

"Um, yes." The General switched off the recording machine that had been humming quietly on his desk, thus making the rest of the conversation private. "We'll come back to that." He leaned back with half-shut eyes that still watched Degnan narrowly. "The first part of your report, on the Venusian primitives, may come in handy eventually, but hardly now. Your findings are negative; we'd accomplish nothing by trying to stir up the Under Race against its masters, since it's too backward technologically to count at all in a modern war."

"Still," said Degnan, "they're people, in spite of their looks. The Over Race aren't."

The General gazed at him soberly. "To be perfectly frank, Colonel—in your expressed judgment of the Over Race I seem to hear a note of hysteria."

Degnan choked back quick resentment. He said in a carefully con-

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trolled voice, "I think we're underestimating them. I'm not a defeatist. But their conviction of their own superiority—"

The General snorted, his wrinkles ferocious. "That's what I mean. You've let them get your goat. Convince you they can defeat us with occult mental powers, or some such rot!"

"Remember," said Degnan stonily, "they have total mentality. They think consciously, logically, with their entire brains, while we use only a small part of ours for that, and the rest is unconscious mind—emotional, rather than logical."

"That's why I think the fact that the Venusians deliberately began this war is—well, ominous. They're constitutionally incapable of fighting just because they're mad. They don't get mad. They've begun it because they think they can win. We outclass them in all ways of making war that we know about. So—they must be ready to make war in ways that we've never heard of." Degnan drew a deep breath, curiously relieved at having brought his own buried fears into the open in plain language.

"They haven't shown much sign of it so far. No Venusians ships, except the tub you were on, have come near our patrols for several days now. They've sent across a good many bombardment rockets—cheap imitations of ours, like their ships—but not a one has got through. Now, where's their terrible secret weapon?"

"I don't know. I do have an idea, though, about one thing they must be banking on. Our fleets were prepared long ago; why haven't they already blasted Venus?" The General was silent, and Degnan knew he had touched a live spot. "Maybe it's because our fleets are national, and each of our sovereign 'United' Nations is holding back, for fear of losing its one or two or three battleships and being at the mercy of its Earthly neighbors when Venus is licked!"

THE GENERAL squinted at him, observed in a dangerously soft tone, "You're talking now, Colonel Degnan, about things that are out of your province and mine as well. Strategy is made by Combined Fleet Headquarters."

"I'm on the outside, but I can still think."

"Maybe," said the General with an odd grimness. He made his wrinkled visage stern. "Now *I'll* tell *you* about the Venusians' secret weapon. Though I shouldn't have to; you seem to be a casualty already."

Degnan merely stared at him. A moment before he had been hot with conviction; now he was cold, feeling fear contract about his heart again.

"We know what they've been trying to do," rasped Fleming, "and we're putting a stop to it. During the last twenty years, a lot of Terrestrials have been on Venus for shorter or longer periods. And off and on, especially in the last few years, we've been considerably irritated by their kidnaping our citizens—as you were kidnaped. Always the same pattern—grab one of our people, then release him after a while, with apologies but no explanations. And they must have got to a lot of humans without our ever knowing it.

"Now we know their aim was to work on the minds of as many Terrestrials as they could, which was probably several hundred. They're good at psychology and that sort of thing, including hypnosis; I'll grant they know more about that than we

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do. And they were using hypnosis to turn those people into traitors—so many Vénusian agents—back here on Earth."

Degnan said, fighting against a wild sinking feeling, "You can't hypnotize a man into betraying what he believes."

"So the psychologists tell me," admitted the General heavily. "I'm not saying your loyalty's been subverted, Degnan. But they did get to a lot of people who weren't very well-balanced to begin with. We've been rounding them up—everybody who's ever been on Venus gets checked and double checked. And we've uncovered a lot of bad eggs already. They've even got an organization of sorts, centering right here in Los Angeles, since most of the ships went out to Venus from here. That's one reason you were given an escort from the field.

"In your case—you can see we'll have to suspend you from active duty. You'll be given an association-test before you leave this building; if its results are negative, you'll be at liberty, but you'll have to come back for detailed psychiatric examination and treatment if indicated."

Degnan was pale under the swarthy complexion that not even sunless Venus had been able to blanch. He moistened his lips, said numbly, "I see."

The General rose and extended his hand. "I'm glad you understand that we can't take any chances. No hard feelings, then?"

"No, sir," muttered Degnan, not knowing whether he lied or not.

HE WASN'T surprised when they let him leave after the association-test; he knew enough about such things to be sure that his unhesitating responses had been the right ones. Loyalty to one's nation is evinced by the right automatic responses to certain key words, such as "liberty", "king", "fatherland", "the proletariat"; and loyalty to the species, though a deeper, truer, more instinctive thing, can be measured in the same manner.

Whatever the Venusians had done to his mind—and they had obviously done something—hadn't affected his inmost self. They might have blanked out some of his memories and left him with post-hypnotic suggestions to remember things that had never happened, but they couldn't have indoctrinated him.

As he paused undecidedly in front of the NAMI building, a girl's cool voice called, "Ralph!"

He looked up, and saw a vision of splendor—a smooth new sky-blue car, plastic top pushed back, parked by the curb in front of him, and Athalie Norton gazing at him from behind the wheel, a shadow of annoyance on her flower-pretty face that was framed by spun-gold hair.

"What's the matter, Ralph?" she asked crisply. "Did General Fleming deafen you? Get in—you can explain on the way out to the house."

He slid in mechanically beside her, without answering, which didn't seem to bother her. She fed power to the gravity-thrust motor and shot the car expertly out into the traffic stream with a surge that would have spun the wheels of anything whose power was transmitted through the wheels. Degnan watched her, reflecting that Athalie did everything like that—surely, with a sort of determined violence. Her fragile blonde beauty was deceptive; behind that mask she always knew what she wanted and got it. Once upon a time she had decid-

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ed she wanted Ralph Degnan.

"How," he asked, "did you know where I was?"

Athalie smiled secretly. "I have ways—or Father has."

Naturally, thought Degnan. Athalie's father was a big man, with the bigness of the corporation he controlled. North American Steel. One way or another, he had made an astronomical amount of money. And Athalie was her father's money's child.

He wasn't sure he was pleased to see her so soon. There were things he needed to work out alone.

"What did they want you for in such a hurry?"

"They wanted," said Degnan grimly, "to tell me I was canned."

She gave him a flashing sidelong glance. "How come?"

"As a psycho, practically. Since the Venusians picked me up, my memory has holes and kinks in it—so NAMI can't trust me any more."

The girl sighed lightly. "Well... that's good. You need a vacation after all those ghastly experiences. Poor Ralph! You can stay at our place and take a good long rest."

DEGNAN was startled by her reaction; then he remembered that his job had never meant anything to her but a minor irritation once the illusion of glamor it had had for her had worn thin. She would gladly have made a kept husband of him; he had sworn fiercely, privately, that she never would.

"Actually," he said carefully, "I'm suspended, indefinitely. That means until the war's over. But...I've got a nasty feeling there may not be any world after this war, Athalie."

She frowned daintily. "You talk like Father. Since the war started he's gone crazy—acts like he thought he was twenty years younger, only he isn't. They requisitioned the *Azor* a week ago; so he offered to remodel it with his own money. And every time I go by our landing field, I have to see what they're doing to it—as if they couldn't fight the Venusians without spoiling that beautiful ship! I'm sick of hearing about the war. If you can't talk about anything else, Ralph darling, please shut up."

"Okay," said Degnan.

She looked at him longer this time, arching a delicate brow, and almost sideswiped a slower vehicle. "Have I offended you? I don't want to..." She had taken the roadway through Elysian Park, and now she turned the power switch to "Braking" and let the car roll to a stop on a small branching driveway behind a shielding screen of trees. Then she leaned back against the cushions, and her brisk wilful self-confidence seemed gone, she was suddenly younger, softer. She breathed, "It's been so long..."

Degnan wouldn't have been human if he could have disregarded that unveiled invitation.

But when she murmured dreamily, close to his ear, "This is real, Ralph. The real thing, and all the rest, all your silly worrying and fretting—cobwebs—" the soft words stabbed him like poisoned knives, and he drew away from her, with eyes grown suddenly cold and remote.

"I don't know, Athalie. I don't know whether you're as real as some of the things I've seen."

"What *are* you talking about?"

He tried to tell her, then, about the prison ship *Sheneb,* the triumphant monsters and the humans whose black nightmare there had ended

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mercifully in a burst of atomic flame. She listened, uncomprehending, her nose wrinkling at last in disgust.

"That's all over. You're safe on Earth. Why not forget it?"

"I've forgotten too much already, I think. And I've got a feeling that remembering is important not just to me but to a lot of other people as well."

The scarlet pout of her lips was childish, but her eyes were a scornful woman's. "You think Earth won't defeat Venus without *your* help? I thought they told you your help wasn't wanted."

That stung; he snapped, "Nothing matters to you but your own selfishness, does it?"

He'd forgotten Athalie had a temper too. "You're the selfish one! You'd sacrifice me to some crackpot idea! Go on, spout about your patriotism or whatever it is you love more than you do me!" Once started, she didn't give him time for breath, let alone interruption, and her rage was self-fueling. "I hate you! Get out! Out of my car and out of my sight!"

Degnan had grown cooler as she grew furious. "All right," he said quietly. "I'm going."

BEFORE he was out the door, Athalie started the car with a jerk that all but sent him sprawling in the grass. He recovered his balance and watched the sky-blue machine whip out of sight beyond a tree-masked curve, as if racing to a date with a smashup.

Degnan shook his head ruefully and turned away, back toward the main road and the border of the park.

This wasn't their first quarrel, but he had a strong feeling that it might be the last. It was too bad about Athalie, because it really wasn't her fault. She hadn't changed; but Degnan knew objectively that he had, since thirty hours aboard the *Sheneb* and since twelve days of—what?—on Venus.

The blank was still there. It must be that out of it crept the uncanny sense of urgency that was stronger and stronger upon him. Of catastrophe, vast and formless, impending unless—or if?—he, and no one else, did something he couldn't quite remember.

As he plodded along the roadside, the scene with Athalie retreated to the back of his mind. Nevertheless, when the car eased to a stop beside him, he thought for a moment it was she, come back.

Then he saw that this car was different. An older model, black, ill-kept, its top almost opaque with dirt and scratches. It had the distinctive personality that old cars acquire, and it was somehow familiar.

But its driver was nobody Degnan had seen before. An oldish man, face marked by hard living like his machine's finish, he leaned toward Degnan, thumb still on the button that had opened the door. "Going downtown? Climb in and save your feet."

DEGNAN got in, muttering thanks. As the car rolled leisurely ahead down the curving parkway, his brain clicked with sudden, belated recognition. This same battered machine had been behind them all the way out here, following with a closeness and tenacity that could hardly have been accidental—that *obviously* hadn't been.

He didn't feel alarmed, but he did know a lively curiosity. He tensed invisibly, waiting for the move that must come.

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"Ever been on Venus, pal?"

Ah-ha, said Degnan to himself, and aloud, "You're psychic, huh?"

"Nah," said the driver. "You just got the look. I was there once, myself."

Check, thought Degnan.

"Yeah," said the other man. "I was a spaceman once, believe it or not. Back before gravities, too, when you sweat out most of every trip in free fall. I been to Venus and Mars and all them places out there. Advancing the cause of Man's Glorious Empire—you know. Now I'm retired, on a pension a bedbug couldn't live on." He spat sidewise, out the window. "A guy gets a raw deal when they got no more use for him. Maybe you know something about that, yourself."

"I'm thinking," said Degnan coldly, "that you know more about me than you're letting on."

The man laughed shortly. "Okay. So you know all about me, and I know all about you, Mr. Degnan. Why not? We're two of a kind." Getting no answer, he went on rapidly, "We've got a lousy deal, and we know the system's rotten. Don't we? It all looks fine—" He gestured jerkily out the windows: they were back on a business street now, where even under the sinking sun the storefronts, the glittering beetle-cars, the walking people were luminous with life and color. "All pretty things and fun—but underneath it's rotten, shot full of holes. People, crawling all over the world—there's too many of them, and they're stupid. *We* know it can't last. Don't we?"

"You mean Venus is going to win the war?"

The other flashed a scared, uncertain glance at him; crawling though the car was now through the traffic, his driving began to make Degnan nervous. "What do you think?"

"I'm no prophet. But I know this," said Degnan bluntly, "that you're human—but the thing that's talking out of you has bug eyes and claws for hands, and breathes formaldehyde."

He saw the man's hands cramp on the wheel; a moment later, as if in instinctive flight, they swerved the car into a sheltering side street. The voice held a hysterical note that was a fusion of pleading and threat: "I'm giving it to you straight. You're one of us. They got part of you, too, back there. They'll never give it back, that part of us, until they win. So they've got to win!" The last words were a whine of fear.

Degnan ruthlessly suppressed the jelly-like quivering of a kindred fear inside him, and sank his voice to an icy tone of menace. "All right, I've heard enough. I'm an Intelligence agent, mister. Drive to NAMI headquarters. Don't try anything; I've got a gun."

That was a bad bluff, he realized as the other snapped on the brake, jerking them forward, and twisted, reaching, and snarling, "The hell you have!"

DEGNAN lunged across the seat; one flat hand caught the fellow under the chin and slammed his head back against the plastic cowl, the other chopped down with split-second timing on his wrist. Degnan scooped the pistol up and leveled it.

"Leastways, I've got a gun now," he amended with a tight grin. He felt almost grateful to the Venusians' slave for providing a splurge of violence to snap him out of his fruitless mental grubbings. And a new idea had struck him; he added, "But I

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don't know whether it's really worth while running you in. The likes of you'll never damage the war effort much... Tell you what, rat. I'll turn you loose, if you explain about that last line you were handing me."

"What—line?" the man muttered dizzily.

"About the Venusians keeping part of you."

The other tried to look defiantly jeering. "It's not just me. It's you too. They've got your soul on Venus, and you'll never get it back unless you help them win!"

Degnan hesitated, then decided against further questioning. This bird evidently knew nothing, apart from what the Over Race for their own purposes had planted inside his skull.

He pronged open the door and thrust his hand with the gun into a pocket. "Okay, brother—you can go tell the other zombies to scratch my name off their list."

He gazed after the swiftly receding car with a grim smile. That injunction wouldn't be obeyed, he was sure—if he didn't meet that one again, there would be more of the same kind looking for him. Which meant, he hoped, a chance to learn more about the thing that most vitally interested him now.

Without much difficulty, he got his bearings and caught a bus for a part of town he knew well, close to the Municipal Spaceport. His plans were simple: he'd rent a room—since he had to stay in Los Angeles anyway, waiting for instructions from headquarters—lie low, and wait for trouble to come to him.

En route, he went over what he'd learned. It wasn't much. General Fleming had been right; there were Venusian agents, human ones, on Earth. And Degnan knew the outlines of one type of induced delusion that the Over Race used to bend minds to their will.

But what had they used on him?

The business of captive souls, he snorted at. But the fact remained that he had lost, if not his soul, twelve days on Venus... Perhaps a psychiatrist would be able to straighten the tangled threads and ravel out his memories, when they got round to his case. But he sensed unreasoningly that something was going to happen before then, something terrible and irreversible, something that he alone must prevent...

IT WAS almost midnight when he finally found a lodging, for the city was overcrowded with the soldiers of the Fleet. The streets were full of them too, even at that late hour, wandering in groups and with girls, carefree as boys on an outing. Earth had known no war in their memory or in their fathers', and their brief military training had given them scant sense of what it might mean.

Degnan went to bed in a fog of depression compounded of his sense of impending disaster, memory of the quarrel with Athalie, and sheer physical weariness.

When he woke at two p.m. the last cause, at least, had been removed, and he felt more equal to the struggle—if only he knew what he was struggling against.

As he ate afternoon breakfast in a second-rate, uniform packed restaurant, his attention was snared by the modulated tones of a news commentator, rolling from the place's wide-open radio:

"Monitors on the Moon report that Radio Venus has broadcast something like an ultimatum to Earth. Receivers

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here didn't pick it up, of course, because of the all-wave scrambling by our defense barrage. But I'm authorized to pass on some of the juicier parts; they may give you a laugh, particularly when you remember the news we got a few hours ago—about how the *Gharukh*, the one first-class battleship Venus had under the Armament Limitation Treaty, was caught off base and blasted out of space by the North American battleship *Alaska* and the Chinese *Yang Tse*.

"But now the high spots of the Venusian pronunciamento. The Over Race announces as its war aims the extermination of humanity and conversion of Earth, according to a prepared 'planetary engineering blueprint', into a Venus-type world, with a cloud blanket and formaldehyde-carbon-dioxide atmosphere.

"The alternative to unconditional surrender—destruction by a mysterious 'final weapon', which is ready to strike at any moment, but which the Venusians hesitate to use, they explain, because it might damage the planet Earth itself and put difficulties in the way of their conversion plan. So they call on us to surrender, offering as bait the promise that a 'chosen few' of the human race will be spared and allowed to migrate to Mars—'a suitable home for the cold-blooded poison-breathers who now inhabit Earth'.

"Surely no more evidence is needed that the war lords of Venus are completely out of touch with reality..."

Somebody in the cafe did laugh at that crack. But Degnan sat staring at the radio, and the glitter of its chromium recalled the gleam of great inhuman eyes, alive with intelligence and a coolly calculating consciousness of power.

Disgust crystallized in him, for the shallow humans who scoffed at the Venusians because they had never conquered space and had shamelessly borrowed and stolen the achievements of Earth science in that field. But the scoffers did not realize that Venus had a science of its own. Their science was not so much quantitatively as qualitatively different from Earth's, and its most basic tenets seemed sheer nonense to an Earthly mind...The Over Race had liberated atomic energy, for example, before the coming of the Earthmen; but no human scientist had ever fathomed the workings of a Venusian atomic engine. They seemed to regard the subatomic particles as possessed in some fashion of will and purpose, and they coaxed atoms apart with gentle persuasion instead of smashing projectiles.

That much Degnan knew—and he was very far from laughing at the Venusian ultimatum.

He realized with a chill start how close his thinking was coming to the propaganda line he had heard yesterday evening, about the decadence and stupidity of mankind. Had he too soaked up some of that mental virus? And what touchstone would serve to distinguish the ideas native to your mind from those deftly inset by a monstrous psychologist?

WHEN HE got back to his room, the green light on the phone recorder was aglow. From headquarters, a summons to come in for further examination, he thought with an odd stirring of rebellion, and flipped on the speaker.

A woman's voice, hauntingly known to him. "Colonel Degnan—this is Margaret Lusk, who was with you on the *Sheneb*.

"I have to warn you. Something

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is about to happen—will begin happening very soon, that will be tremendously important to you and through you to—everybody. You must be ready."

The voice changed, became somehow more emotional, more human, and still more familiar. "If you'll meet me this evening at seven, in front of the City Museum—maybe I can tell you something more. I can't promise, because I don't know how I know what I said before... But please come. You've got to come!"

That was all. The recorder hummed unnoticed for a time; finally Degnan spun it back and ran the message off again.

Whatever the quirk in his head was—delusion, premonition—he wasn't alone with it. He had company, and the knowledge was a straw to cling to.

Warmly, though he thought impersonally, he remembered the dark-haired girl called Margaret Lusk—ridiculous that he hadn't learned her name before, after all they'd been through together. He felt a queer bond between himself and her, born of a few long, long minutes aboard the *Sheneb*; and he found himself, half-consciously, comparing his memory of her face, ravaged by suffering and terror, with his last glimpse of Athalie—blonde beauty marred by passion, her furious blindness to everything but her own desires. The comparison was in Margaret Lusk's favor.

Above all, though—she might hold the answer, or a part-answer, to the question that was becoming his nightmare.

BEFORE seven o'clock he was marching restlessly up and down in the park grounds before the Museum. In the warm gathering dusk, there were other strollers otherwise preoccupied. Couples arm in arm, walking or sitting on the benches and talking and laughing softly while darkness came over the city.

In the west, above the trees, a bright star shone before the rest—Venus as evening star. The people in the park saw it, but their gayety was not damped by it.

As the night came nearer, Venus grew brighter still and the other stars came out, and high up among them brief sparks of light streaked swiftly like the burning pebbles of a meteor shower, and died redly or flared out of existence in soundlessly brilliant explosions. They came as often as one to the minute, in every part of the sky, and Degnan knew what they were—bombardment rockets from Venus approaching Earth at five hundred or a thousand miles a second, caught and wiped out by the interceptor barrage.

Ahead of him a girl squealed with a tingling thrill of fright and snuggled against the soldier with her, as they saw one flash out brighter than the rest.

"That was a near one," said the soldier gruffly. "Must not have stopped it more than two, three hundred miles up. But," he swelled his chest a little "we're safe. Not a one's got through, and not a one's going to."

The girl murmured something admiring.

Margaret Lusk was late showing up. Degnan was begining to wonder if she'd stood him up, or if there had been some mistake in time or place. And then he glimpsed her at the other end of the tree-lined walk he had been pacing, turned and hurried toward her.

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As he came near he saw that it was really she, trim and tidy as he had not seen her before, her dark hair braided neatly about her head. She saw him too, smiled quickly and started to call to him...

A huge and blazing star glided clear across the sky, drenching the Museum's grounds and the whole city in an unholy bath of reddish light. Far to the eastward it touched the Earth, and a second later a mountain of searingly radiant vapor began rising there, boiling higher and higher and turning night to day even as the fire-trail faded.

By that glare, Degnan saw the girl's pale face and wide eyes looking like holes burned in a blanket. He said idiotically, "We're all right. The city wasn't hit."

"It's happened!" she gasped, and he couldn't tell whether her tone was terror or ecstasy. She stood stiffly beside him but apart, gazing at the rising pillar of fire.

Degnan's ability to think came back; he snapped, "Better get down. Flat on the ground. The shock-wave'll be here before long."

But it was minutes before the ground heaved and shuddered with earthquake. On the heels of the earth-wave came the air-wave, a hurricane in violence, and in its midst the lights in the Museum facade, which had so far burned steadily, went out as something happened to Los Angeles' central power plant. Screams rose then from among the people scattered in the park.

THOUGH Degnan didn't know it then, he had seen the arrival of the first of the hyperspace projectiles, which landed fifty miles east of Los Angeles. The manner of its coming was this:

The great robot brain in Denver, which coordinated the defense barrage over all North America and parts of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, registered, routinewise, the approach of a Venusian missile aimed at the West Coast. Nothing unusual; a torpedo of normal size, traveling at the somewhat low velocity of five hundred miles per second. In routine fashion, also, the calculator transmitted the information to its human watchers at the same time that it made the necessary computations and sent out the necessary orders to subsidiary units of the interception network. No special alarm was sounded, since it was a simple piece of work to encompass the projectile's destruction.

To do that, the robot brain in essence set up within its own structure the rocket's flight in space and physically possible evasive maneuvers, correlated with the positions of the mines strewn lavishly in orbits about the Earth. It sent out the signals to set those mines in motion that would carry them across all possible paths of the missile, with their blast guns, their charges of atomic explosive and their seeking, thinking controls.

Within the brain the paths converged, met, and the rocket was destroyed.

But in the reality of space, ten thousand miles out—a detector in the Venusian projectile tripped a switch at the first contact with Earth radar, and threw it into hyperspace drive. And it never reached any of the predicted positions, never encountered the searching beams or the shattering explosions.

The robot brain knew that within a fraction of a second. It rang the alarm, this time, and simultaneously sent the inner belt of mines into action.

By now men were incredulously

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watching the instruments that registered the hyperspace projectile's flight—or tried to register it; the wild shifting of the needles, the crazy fluctuation of the graphs could not be translated into any meaningful space-time coordinates.

While they stared, helpless, the embattled calculator used its last resort; hundreds of interception rockets, tiny, viciously potent proximity-fused things, left their launching sites and climbed at a hundred thousand gravities' acceleration to meet the enemy.

It evaded them, too, still flying its impossible course, and fell not far from San Bernardino, which together with neighboring Riverside and other towns and villages around, vanished that instant from the face of the Earth. Like most such weapons, the hyperspace projectile bore no explosive warhead; but it struck at five hundred miles a second. It blasted a crater a mile across, and the shock waves from it did much damage in San Diego.

By that time the second one, which landed on Calcutta and killed two million people, was coming in toward the Asiatic sector.

DARKNESS, pallidly relieved by the rising moon, lay with strange silence on the great city. Somewhere, far off, sirens sobbed of disaster.

The girl stood facing Ralph Degnan, her back against a tree-trunk in a vaguely defensive pose. He could not read her face, a white blur in the shadow.

He commanded again, "Think! What more do you know?"

"I don't know," said Margaret Lusk. "I had to send you that message, that's all. Something told me to call you—but not about meeting you here. That was my idea."

"I can guess what 'something' was," growled Degnan. He wanted to question her ruthlessly and to the point, but he was finding it hard to concentrate. Something was churning in his mind, struggling toward the light like a formless monster heaving itself to the surface of a swamp. Since the projectile's fall he had felt that—the sense of being about to remember something once known but forgotten.

His outward senses seemed to strain sympathetically toward hyperacuteness. He thought he heard rustlings round about, a stealthy scuffing of feet in the park shrubbery...

An idea struck him with shocking force. He demanded, "Say! How'd you know where to call me? I only found that room late last night!"

She made no reply, but he heard the quick, suspicious intake of breath.

"Answer me!"

Then the slight sounds he had heard and half-dismissed materialized into a rush of pounding feet from every side at once. Instinctively he ducked and spun around. Someone tackled him round the waist and hung on, and other hands were laid on him. His fists lashed out at indistinct figures, and smote air as often as flesh and bone; he lunged furiously, and had a moment's hope of breaking free before something blunt and hard descended stunningly on his head.

The blow made the joints of his skull creak like rusty hinges, and for a while time stood still. When he began to struggle out of the fog, there was a while when he only wanted to crawl back under it and leave his headache outside.

He grew aware that he was sitting propped up, and the feel of

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the cushioned seat and its slight movements told him he was in a car. Someone was on each side of him. He thought: I'm getting lots of free rides. Then he realized that this was a Ride in the worst sense of the word.

A BRASSY voice was speaking—Degnan couldn't see, because something like a sack was pulled smotheringly over his face, but he formed an instant dislike for the speaker— "I say get rid of him. Hell! If I'd hit him a little harder, there wouldn't be any argument."

"Nah," said a whining voice that he remembered sharply, from yesterday evening, "you couldn't hit that hard, Clark. His head's so thick, even *they* couldn't pound anything into it."

"Maybe I'll show you if I could," said Clark viciously. "Now, what's wrong with stopping right here and kicking him off a pier? We got enough troubles without him..."

"Will you listen to me?" broke in a voice that chilled Degnan to the bone, for it was the voice of Margaret Lusk. "I tell you, he knows something. He has a command. Or why would I have been told to send him a message?"

Degnan thought dully: Slaves of Venus, all of them. I was going to lead them on and find out what they know about this hypnotic business—so I walked straight into a baited trap. And now I'm supposed to know something they don't!

What, exactly, was he supposed to know?... Oh, yes. Sure. That's right.

He remembered, but not the where and how of his coming to know what he did. It fitted somewhere in that twelve-day blank that he still couldn't fill in consecutively... It was like in the stories where a crack on the head cures the hero's amnesia; but he knew it wasn't that simple.

Clear to him were principles and details of the construction and operation of the Venusians' new weapon, the hyperspace projectile, and of the hyperspace drive in general—a startlingly simple modification, simple at least to Venusian minds, of the Earth-invented gravitics. It was as plain as if someone had just been explaining it all to him, even the gravitic principles he'd been hazy on before.

The revelation shocked him so that he moved convulsively, and discovered that his wrists were lashed together.

"He's coming to life," announced still another voice beside him.

The girl went on unheeding: "It's obvious *they* have a purpose in this, and we'd be crazy if we disregarded it. They cast him adrift with me in the *Sheneb's* life rocket, close to Earth—and I think he was the one they wanted to be sure got here, and I was just ballast. We've got to wait and see."

"Okay, okay," grumbled the man called Clark. "But I think we're cutting our throats."

Degnan hadn't stirred again; he was slumped between his captors, prey momentarily to a paralyzing horror.

He could imagine what was happening now all over Earth—wherever the Venusians chose to aim their new unstoppable projectiles. Irresistible, yet real and deadly, because the concept of hyperspace as an *otherwhere*, wholly out of touch with here and now, was false; rather, it was an *otherhow*. The great calculators of the Earth's defense centers, and the lesser brains of the barrage, could compute trajectories and probabilities in normal space-

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time, but the course of a hyperspace missile was utterly unpredictable by normal mathematics. Interception of one of them would be pure lucky accident.

THE CAR stopped. Still blinded, he was pushed roughly out. Even with a hard muzzle thrusting into his back, he had to draw tight rein on the impulse to break away and make a dash for freedom.

He tripped over low steps, heard a door open and smelled close indoor air. The gun prodded him forward a short distance, then Clark's voice behind him ordered, "Turn left."

Degnan sensed that the room was a small one even before someone jerked off the blinder. He found himself facing a beefy redfaced man who stood negligently pointing a heavy gun. Degnan's eyes widened slightly; the gun was a flame pistol, actually a compact, pocket-sized atomic blast, strictly forbidden to civilians.

The room was sparsely furnished with a couple of chairs, a table, and a studio couch; dust of neglect on everything. The single window was shuttered, the ceiling light on, which must mean the power had come back.

Behind Clark's thick figure, Degnan saw the slight one of Margaret Lusk, flanked by his insinuating acquaintance of yesterday and another man, a hollow-eyed, unshaven specimen. The girl's dark gaze rested on Degnan with speculation and, he thought, a touch of compassion.

Clark waggled the flame pistol. "Okay, fellow. She says you've got a command. What is it?"

Degnan was stonily silent. The truth wouldn't do him any good, and he didn't know enough to risk making up a story. If he could learn a little more about what went on—

Clark scowled. "If we're going to find out anything from this dummy, maybe I'd better persuade him to talk."

"You don't really think that would work?" said the girl coldly.

"Never know what a guy'll take until you try him."

"You make me sick," she said, and Degnan had to marvel despite himself at her air of cool superiority. "I don't know why you had to go after him in the first place. Whatever command he carries with him will be set to function in its own time and way, though he may not know what it is himself—and we may be interfering with the Over Race's plans."

Clark's red face grew shades paler; he backed away from the prisoner, the flame gun jittering in his grip in a way that set Degnan's teeth on edge.

"But we can't let him go," mumbled the big man. "Can we?"

The girl shrugged. "No. But we can keep him here, and try to find out—in an intelligent way—what he's supposed to do."

"How?"

She bit her lip, frowning faintly. Her gaze traveled searchingly over Degnan's set face, as if trying to read his thoughts. If she could have done so, she wouldn't have found them pleasant; he was nursing the bittersweet thought of getting his hands on her throat. At the moment, it seemed to him that he hated the girl more than the others, as if her betrayal of humanity had wounded him personally and deeply...

She said with decision, "We'll have to try hypnosis."

The other slaves of Venus stared. Clark grunted suspiciously, "Maybe *you* know how to do that?"

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MARGARET LUSK nodded confidently. "It's the only way to find out what's in a person's subconscious mind—and that's where the Over Race plant their commands." She picked up a handbag from the table and rummaged in it, came out with something that flashed—a small mirror; she explained, "It's not hard. You fix their attention with something bright, and.... Well, just keep quiet and I'll show you."

She moved to the studio couch and spent a minute or so carefully adjusting its cushions, then beckoned Degnan to sit down. He obeyed silently, watching her with gathering puzzlement. "That's it. Now lean back. Way back. Relax."

There was an odd tense urgency in her low voice—scarcely the soothing note the hypnotist uses. And the whole show was unutterably phony. Degnan was no expert on hypnotic technique, but he was familiar enough with it to realize that Margaret knew a good deal less than he... Deliberately he kept his expression impassive, leaned back obediently against the cushions, hands still bound behind him.

She was waving the hand-mirror slowly to and fro in front of his eyes, murmuring, "Relax. Sleep. Go to sleep..." She couldn't really imagine that hocus-pocus would work. It might conceivably have had an effect on a very cooperative subject; but anybody knew that to put an unwilling victim under you needed drugs or other drastic aids. Then he noticed from the corner of his eye that the spot of light reflected from the little mirror was dancing erratically on the wall; the hand that held it was trembling.

The others were taken in, though. They watched open-mouthed, with something of superstitious awe—except Clark, maybe; the big man's eyes were narrowed as they rested on the girl. But even he had dropped the heavy flame gun into his jacket pocket.

Margaret's dark eyes held Degnan's, and their bright intense gaze mirrored—pleading? "Go to sleep. You're sinking—down, down—deep into the cushions—"

Degnan's bound hands writhed behind him, while with all his control he strove to remain outwardly immobile. He managed to keep from moving, even when a sharp pain stabbed one of those searching hands. He fumbled further, got hold of the penknife that had been hidden just under the edge of the cushion at his back. It was a little thing, but razor-keen. With infinite care he began working it between his wrists and the thin, tough cord that held them.

Clark scowled darkly and came forward, hulking and purposeful; he grasped Margaret's arm, and Degnan saw her wince. "You're getting nowhere fast," he growled. "I've seen hypnotism acts, and that's not the way—"

She whirled on him in a fury that must have been real. "Now you've done it. I'll have to start over—"

"I don't know." Clark didn't let loose of the girl. "I'm beginning to wonder just what the hell you're up to."

THERE WOULDN'T be a better chance. Degnan came to his feet in a rush whose impetus was behind the long straight punch he aimed at a point below the big man's ear.

Clark had time to start turning his head, and caught it glancingly on the side of the jaw, but it sent him reeling against the wall. And Degnan, without ever stopping mov-

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ing, had scooped up a chair and clubbed it down on the fellow who had tried to convert him the day before.

The hollow-eyed one was backing to the far end of the room and tugging out a pistol. Degnan sent the chair rocketing at him with the speed and unavoidability of an artillery shell, and swung around to face Clark, who had come dizzily erect and was clawing at his coat pocket. Degnan tackled him and they crashed to the floor together; Degnan applied the ju-jitsu methods that were part of his NAMI training, and an instant later the flame gun was in his hand.

As he scrambled clear of the groaning Clark, he heard Margaret's scream blend with a crash of glass. The hollow-eyed man was backed against the further wall / with an automatic in his hand, and he had just dodged a thrown table lamp. Without hesitation and almost without aiming, Degnan pulled the trigger.

The concussion was almost stunning in the little room. The air filled chokingly with smoke, and through it flames climbed with a crackling roar, blanketing one end of the room and already blocking the doorway. Degnan snatched up the other chair, found Margaret with his eyes. He shouted, "The window!" and drove the chair—luckily it was a metal-framed one—through glass and shutters. Instantly the fire whipped toward the vent created. Degnan caught Margaret's hand; he shouldered his way through the window, breaking out the remains of the pane, and drew the girl after him.

The night air was cool and sweet. Behind, the house was burning like a torch; some not too scrupulous builder must have used inflammable plastics in it. "Make sure your clothes haven't caught," said Degnan breathlessly, "and come on!" He gestured toward the back, where a weed-grown garden seemed to lead to an alley.

"Wait!" cried Margaret. "Maxon's car's out front."

"That's ri— No; we haven't got the key."

He saw her smile in the glare of the fire. "I have it. I took it off him while you were fighting the others."

"Well, I'll be damned!"

THEY raced round to the front of the burning house. As yet, the noise and blaze didn't seem to have attracted anyone; the nearest dwellings were lightless—perhaps many people had fled the city or taken to their cellars in fear of the hyperspace bombardment, and the police and perhaps the fire department too would be having their hands full tonight.

As he set the car in motion, Degnan said quietly, "Thanks, Margaret. I hope you'll live to know how much this means."

She didn't look at him or answer. Degnan drove slowly for a little while, to avoid being reported fleeing from the scene of the fire; he touched the button that slid back the top of the car, and glanced at the night sky. Overhead, the stars were lost in a murky darkness in which intermittent lightning flickered, weirdly soundless, and once or twice there were long streaks of fire and far thunder. With prescient certainty, Degnan knew that Earth could not long endure the punishment Venus was giving her now... His face grew hard with determination.

He turned onto one of the arterial highways, heading toward the center of the city, and increased speed

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as much as he dared, until the old car's drive unit whined protest into the whistle of wind.

Margaret said abruptly, "I want you to know—I didn't lead them to you on purpose. They knew where you were, anyway—it was Clark that gave me your address."

Degnan's mouth tightened; he didn't take his eyes off the road. "I still don't get the whole picture. What about these 'commands' of yours?"

This time her gaze was steady and fearless upon him. "It was horrible. I just didn't seem to care. Everything was ugly and useless, and I hated everybody and myself most of all... It wasn't hearing voices or anything like that. I just knew what I had to do, and all the time I knew too that something a long way off was pulling the strings and making me do it... Then, when they slugged you, there in the park, something seemed to go 'pop', and I knew *it* had lost control."

"For keeps?"

She held her head high, beautiful in a defiance aimed not at Degnan but at the monstrous thing in her memory. "Sometimes I can feel it trying to creep back like a snake, crawling, trying to wrap itself around me..." She shivered. "But I can brush it away. I'm myself now, and I'm going on being myself."

Degnan was silent, wondering: posthypnotic suggestions, then? Her telepathic sensitivity must be way up there, over a hundred on the Bjornsson scale... His own sensitivity was low, he knew, and he hadn't felt anything like that. In his case there were only memory gaps and memories that weren't real. For the first time it occurred to him that his knowledge of the hyperspace principle might be one of those—but he couldn't believe that; the knowledge was too complete, too logically coherent.

"How'd you come to get mixed up with that gang?"

"I wandered away from the spaceport—I didn't know where I was going. Somebody was following me, I think—" Degnan nodded, as if to say "naturally"—"then I met Clark, and he showed me how to lose them, and took me to that house where the others were. They told me I'd left my soul on Venus, and it was true, then. Later on they seemed to be afraid of me, because I knew things they didn't..." She paused, passing a hand across her eyes.

INWARDLY, Degnan cursed the Over Race's science. But outwardly he smiled and said, "You're out from under now. They can make it stick with minds that are off balance already, but they guessed wrong about us."

She gave him a queer, scared look. "I'm free now. But I'm not so sure about you."

"Eh?"

"I told those men I thought you had a command from Venus. I'm still not sure it isn't true."

"If so," said Degnan harshly, "something's gone wrong with their chain of command. They're due for a shock! But if you thought that, why'd you help me get away?"

Margaret's face was in shadow as they passed between lightless rows of houses. "I'm not sure," she said candidly. "I like you, Degnan, and I wanted to help you—but I have a funny impersonal sort of feeling about you, too. As if—you were the most important man in the world."

Degnan smiled tautly. "There your feelings are on the right track. I am."

"What do you mean?"

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"That thing that landed east of here tonight—and others like it must be hitting Earth every few minutes. I know what they are and how to stop them, and I've got to make what I know count in time. That's why we're on the way to NAMI headquarters now."

"Oh," was all she said.

He had once more to admire her control. There on the *Sheneb* he had thought her hysterical; actually she had been sapped by the mental poison the Venusians had administered. Now she was whole again and strong.

"I'm not taking you there," he assured her. "Stop off anywhere you like."

She didn't brighten. "I've nowhere to go; my brother was my only relative," she said tonelessly, and he wondered if she knew the prison ship had been destroyed. "And if any of those men got out of the fire back there—they and the others like them will be after me."

Degnan hesitated momentarily. "Now's not a good time to turn yourself in. Everybody'll be scared halfwitted by what's happening and you might get some rough handling. I'm not looking forward to an easy time myself." He came to a quick, illogical decision, assuring himself that what he, and the whole world, owed this girl outweighed the minutes that would be lost. "I've got a room rented for a week in advance and a feeling I won't be using it. There's automatic service; if you don't go out, nobody's likely to even know you're there for a few days, anyway. And when this is over, I'll see you again."

He knew where he was now, and picked a turnoff from the highway without hesitation. In front of the hotel, he pressed the key and some folded bills into her hand, then gave her the flame gun he had taken from Clark, and advised curtly: "If the police find you—better give yourself up and hope for the best. But if your ex-playmates come around—give them fair warning, then push off the safety, like this, and let fly. It'll blow the side out of the apartment but don't let that stop you. You ought to be all right if nothing hits Los Angeles—which it won't, if I get through in time."

On impulse he bent to kiss her goodbye. The kiss lasted longer than it was meant to, with the race for the world's life still ahead.

GENERAL Fleming was restlessly on his feet, pacing aimlessly back and forth as if his roomy office had become a prison cell. The shriveled mask of his face no longer hid the very real fear and uncertainty behind it.

A redeyed and unkempt Ralph Degnan sprawled in the General's chair and wished the General would stop talking so he could catch a moment's sleep before the flier was ready. It had been a grinding session in the small hours with the handful of mathematicians and engineers he had finally persuaded them to call in—those men, who had been working without sleep on the problem of the hyperspace projectiles, had been at first wearily impatient, not believing, then at the last they had been wide-awake, firing questions at him faster than he could give the answers that were already clear in his mind.

Fleming said abruptly, "I've had our defense potential concentrated over Los Angeles as long as you're still here. Once you get to Combined Fleet Headquarters, you'll be out of danger—about the only place on Earth they still can't touch. It's been more than six hours now since

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they sent over any of those damn things, but no telling when it will start again. God, how I'd like to think they'd used up their supply... Maybe those devils are just getting something new ready. We stopped over half of them during the last hour's bombardment, and deflected most of the rest. But we've fired three months' ammunition in four and a half hours. Our production can't begin to fill the gap. You've got to be right!"

Degnan said nothing. General Fleming worried on: "I can't understand why human operators, working by guess, can stop them oftener than the machines."

"The calculators are logical," said Degnan. "And so is the path of a body in hyperspace. But it's a different logic. That's all 'hyperspace' means—a different set of rules from those that apply to normal space and energy and matter, the rules man's been learning and building machines by for thousands of years. Our robot brains work according to those rules, so they can't determine the trajectory of a hyperspace projectile."

The General shook his head bewilderedly.

"Our physics has been devoted to determining the characteristics of space, which to the Venusian psycho-physicists means the behavior habits of energy and matter," explained Degnan wearily. "They found that other behavior patterns are possible. The difference is a question of energy levels. When a projectile changes to hyperspace drive, it loses about one kilogram of mass, which means enough energy to shake a planet. That's related to the variation in limiting velocities—incidentally, we can use this principle to travel faster than light, or the Venusians can, if—" He stopped.

The General frowned, grasped at a reality he could understand. "Colonel Degnan—I think I can admit now that you were right about the reason for delay in our offensive."

Degnan smiled faintly. "The big powers were afraid their handsome warships would get dented?"

"Not any more, by heaven! Last word from CFHQ says the delegates took just one quarter of an hour to reach a unanimous decision after the second projectile landed. All fleets made fully available. The offensive is being mounted now—"

A phone on the General's desk buzzed. He snatched it up, listening for a moment without answering, and turned on Degnan with the receiver in his hand. "On your way! Your clearance has come through and the flier will be ready by the time you're on the field!"

DEGNAN'S memory preserved in photographic, nightmarish detail one glimpse of Los Angeles Spaceport as he skirted the field with his guards.

Far out beyond the girdling fence, four great black warships loomed ready for takeoff and rendezvous with the gathering fleets. Above them the sky was turbulent, murkily luminous; Earth was slowly veiling her face in the smoke and dust of her own destruction, the reek of shattered cities and ruined countrysides.

Between the fence and the field itself, under a glare of floodlights, seethed a mass of people, men and women almost equally mixed. They were the same people Degnan had seen in the streets and parks of the city, walking by twos and laughing unafraid in their security. Now, a confused crying rose over them, a voice of tears and lamentation. Wom-

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en clung to their men, summoned this hour to duty, and wept and would not let them go to space and the deadly ships and the horror of airless or flaming death millions of miles from anything. And the men—were leaving wives and sweethearts on a world grown perhaps less safe than the gun-decks of a warship.

Along the fence ranged stiffly a line of robot marines, armored bodies gleaming coldly under the lights, waiting mindlessly for orders from the mustached officer who stood beside them and watched the scene with an air of bleak dissatisfaction.

As Degnan and the two Intelligence agents with him hurried past, the officer turned his back on the crowd. Drops of sweat glistened on his expressionless face as he snapped an order to the motionless machines. The line of seven-foot robots pivoted with inhuman precision and moved on the swarm of humans, against and among them. Their steel arms flashed and thrust, separating those who must go from those who stayed behind, with the efficiency of a mechanical sorter...

One of the men with Degnan muttered something under his breath. The other said, "They ought to stop that. They shouldn't let those women come this far: they go crazy when they see the ships. It's bad for morale."

"Oh, dry up!" said the other.

Degnan said nothing. His dark face was rock-hard as he led them both across the field toward the flier that waited, dwarfed by the vastness of the interplanetary cruisers.

One of his escorts—the one who had said, "Oh, dry up!"—went aboard with him, the other returned to report that they'd got him safely that far.

GLANCING out through the heavy glass of a window, Degnan became aware that, above the artificial lights of the field, the sky was beginning to flush with rose and delicate violet. Not a minute later, when the flier was many miles above the Earth and racing westward, that had become a red and murky dawn, the dust of battle diffusing sunlight and turning itself into the likeness of smoke from hell's furnaces.

Westward, out over the Pacific. Degnan turned to the man beside him, "Where we headed? Asia?"

The agent shrugged; Degnan guessed that he honestly didn't know. Combined Fleet Headquarters was the secret of secrets—Earth's hidden nerve center, housing the top military staffs and the top scientists who could—perhaps—still make use of Degnan's special knowledge in time.

Degnan had firmly intended to sleep through the flight, but a gnawing unrest kept him wide awake now. Deliberately he lit a cigarette; by the time it was smoked down the flier might be over China. He found himself alternately glancing at his watch and staring with smarting eyes out the window, into the flaming cauldron of clouds that brightened as the ship rose higher, then began fading again as its flight outran the sunrise. His imagination did strange things with it, turned it into something terrible, a burning wind and fire that swept over the face of the Earth and left lifeless desert behind. The Over Race's final weapon, with which their radio had threatened Earth again last night...

Probably a bluff, he told himself angrily. And why should it occur to him now? He could do nothing that he was not doing already—going at a dozen miles a second to save

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Earth from the hyperspace bombardment.

But why the deadly pressure behind his racing thoughts, the cold knot of fear in his stomach, his sense that the sands were running out?

A change of pitch in the high screaming of thin air outside told him the ship was going down, probably slowing as well toward a landing. It rocked and swerved a little, battered by the changing pressures of a too-swift descent, and Degnan glimpsed a vast sweep of ocean, glittering in faint moonlight, unbroken by any land. All at once he remembered that these gravitic fliers could travel under water as well, and he knew where Combined Fleet Headquarters was—under the bottom of the Pacific, below one of the great deeps. The only place on Earth, sheltered under all that cushioning water, that no interplanetary bombardment could reach. There might have been a political motive for the choice of location, too; the oceans had belonged to no nation since the first feeble international laws were set up.

A MINUTE or two left. The roar of riven air grew louder, more ominous—like the whistle of a shell prolonged intolerably, for a lifetime before the explosion thunders, like the scream of a falling bomb—

A bomb was falling, howling and shrieking its tuneless death song before it blew itself into nothingness and took with it the whole Earth, everything, everything that had been good and bad and indifferent in the world of man. Its crescendo noise swelled and beat against the confines of Degnan's skull, drowning the one silent sound that he had to hear.

Something in his brain was struggling, beating on a closed and barricaded door, shouting incoherently into the clamor of the descending bomb. Degnan saw only the sweeping second-hand of his watch. He had to understand, to remember before that hand went round once or twice again and it was too late forever and ever.

Something was coming up out of the abyss of darkness and drugged forgetfulness. The gleam of his watch-face transformed itself into the pitiless shining eyes of a great Venusian, eyes cold and burning with knowledge and passionless will.

It was a scientist and a ruler—one of the masters of the Over Race, who would some day be masters of the Universe. As man had foolishly dreamed...

"Forget," it seemed to drone in the travesty of human speech that was the best their voice-converters could make of Venusian speech-sounds. "Forget one minute longer, and the experiment will succeed. Go on. You cannot fail. We cannot fail."

It lied. With a savage effort of will, he wiped the vision out of existence. And as it vanished, the floodgates of memory were opened, and he knew—what Venus had planned, what he had been about to do.

As Degnan's sight cleared, he found himself on his feet, swaying like a drunken man. Before him danced a face, that of his escort, whom he must have pushed aside as he stood up—a shocked stare, dawning suspicion: "What's the matter with you?"

Degnan faltered only a moment. With merciless clarity he realized the impossibility of explaining to this man, or any other, in the time that was left; with regret, but with brutal purposefulness, he hit the agent on the point of the jaw and

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saw the man fall down limply.

The pilot had still less warning. Degnan struck one skillful, chopping blow and snatched at the control bar; through the nose window he saw the steely glint of waves sliding swiftly nearer, and yanked. He felt nothing, of course, through the full-gravity-thrust drive. But now there was only the night sky in the window, and he knew the flier was climbing almost vertically. Only then did he heave the half-stunned pilot out of his seat and into the aisle of the passenger compartment.

HE SANK into the seat, breathing hard, momentarily incapable of further thought or action. Through timeless intervals, the sky's turbid darkness gave place to a hard, crystal-clear blackness, and in it the stars came out and shone with unwinking brilliance. On the control panel an alarm buzzed stridently and a red light winked on and off. That meant the flier was approaching the danger limit for unshielded atmospheric craft, radiation in the space around it becoming dangerous to life. Still, it was a while before Degnan stirred to shift the controls and drop Earthward again.

He leveled out in the stratosphere, recovering from shock and beginning to think furiously. There was no hiding here, high up in air; within minutes, at most, an alarm would be out and radar tracers searching for the flier. Overpowering the other, seizing the ship had been an almost instinctive reaction of self-preservation; it made no real difference in his position. He was outlawed anyway, exiled from Earth now and forever by the strangest and most terrible fate a man had ever suffered.

Behind him someone groaned, beginning to come to. Almost without looking around, Degnan slammed and locked the door of the pilot's compartment. Clinging desperately to sanity, he tried to form a plan.

He knew now the nature of the Venusians' final weapon. He was that weapon.

Every atom of his body, every particle of flesh and blood and bone was a grain of explosive waiting for the flash of a detonator.

Earthmen had known, without thoroughly understanding, that the Over Race's science could convert any inorganic substance into fissionable material without changing its overt physical or chemical properties; for that reason, import of articles from Venus had been rigorously supervised. They had not known, the enemy had carefully kept them from finding out, that the same thing could be done with living matter. The Venusian liberation of nuclear energy was inferior, in ergs returned for ergs invested, to Earth's use of the power metals—but it had the one decisive advantage in war, that a Venusian atomic bomb could take any form, even that of a living, breathing man. *The one form in which it would surely pass Earth's defenses and find its way—*

Degnan remembered what the detonating impulse was to have been. A simple and thoroughly Venusian device. His arrival—his own realization that he had arrived—at CFHQ would have been the trigger.

Mass times the velocity of light squared—he tried briefly to calculate the force of explosion, and recoiled from the figures that suggested themselves. At the very least, Earth's vital center would have vanished into dust together with cubic miles of the planet's surface.

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HE COULDN'T go back. If he were taken to CFHQ, even his conscious knowledge of what was to come would not check the automatic reaction. Even his lifeless body must not return to Earth. It was that thought, largely, that had kept him from heading the flier on into space and the burning bath of radiation; the defense patrol would intercept it and bring him back, alive or dead. He couldn't imagine that there was any alternative way of setting off the explosion, any control that could reach across space from Venus—but the danger was too great for any chance to be taken.

Also, he was not the kind of man to display suicidal courage until every other kind of courage had failed.

The Venusians had known him well, he realized sickly, when they had chosen him. They had planned every step ahead, foreseen everything, when they had arranged his "escape" from the *Sheneb*, his return to Earth with the knowledge they had deliberately planted in his mind, knowledge important enough to make sure he would be sent to CFHQ—latent, triggered into consciousness by the fall of the first hyperspace projectile. Perhaps they had even made sure to see that he would be in the open to see that by inspiring Margaret Lusk to make a date with him in the park; at all events, her call had been a psychological primer, to put him in a receptive mood. His capture by the Venusians' slaves, to be sure, had been a crossup in their scheme—it showed, what might be important, that they didn't have direct mental control over the humans they had worked on—but it had made little difference. They had known he would get through; they had chosen their instrument with perfect understanding of human psychology... But, no: their plan had failed at the last moment, when the mental blocks they had used on Degnan had gone down by a miracle he was still too dazed to question. There was still room to hope.

Drenched in cold sweat, Degnan stared at the gleaming dials and knobs before him, the paling sky beyond the nose of the flier. He had headed it mechanically back the way it had come, toward the North American coast. And now an idea began to glimmer... He would be risking not only his own life—forfeit already!—but many others besides; yet on the other hand... Convulsively he leaned forward and spun the power rheostat as far as it would go.

The line of shore was featureless in the light of a gray dawn, encroaching on the oily darkness of the sea. Degnan braked the flier swiftly and swooped lower, finding partial orientation by the lights that still shone sickly here and there, where Los Angeles sprawled to southward.

At last he located the little bay he knew. Rummaging hastily in a storage compartment, he found the automatic pistol stowed there as per some ancient regulation having to do with mutiny on shipboard; he thrust it into a trousers pocket. He cast his coat aside, and dropped the flier still lower. When it drifted at a bare twenty miles an hour only a few feet above still deep water not far offshore, he flung open the emergency door, took a deep breath and in the same motion pulled back on the control bar and leaped clear.

WHEN HE broke the surface, striking out for the beach, he dashed the water from his eyes and saw the flier already far away, climb-

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ing and vanishing into the gray-rose sky. The farther it traveled before it was picked up, the less help it would be to the men who shortly would be combing the planet to find him.

If they could know not only where he was but *what* he was—there would probably be a mass exodus from Los Angeles right now. He reflected grimly that, if the worst were realized, if there were an open switch on Venus that would be closed when the enemy grew tired of waiting, Los Angeles would get it whether he was there or not. He had stayed there two days—and a nail-paring of his, a stray hair from his head, would be enough to level city blocks.

He splashed ashore and broke into a jogging run that, weary as he was, he could keep up for the short distance he had to go.

As he ran, the Earth seemed to groan beneath his steps with a premonition of catastrophe.

He couldn't go to the authorities again; with horrible vividness he pictured himself trying to explain to them, being called crazy and shipped back, a prisoner, drugged perhaps, to CFHQ so the scientists there could pick his brains. But he had to have help, and he was going to the only place on Earth where help might be.

The wide white house came into sight as he rounded a bend in the beach road. Built in the rambling California style, among pruned green gardens on a rise of ground, it had a view of the sea from its flat roof—the roof where, on a warm night with a great moon silvering the Pacific, he had got engaged to Athalie, once in a world that was far away and unreal. Tonight, if tonight ever came, there would be no moon.

But Athalie was there. He found her—having flung open the unlocked door and plunged inside without ceremony, in a sudden fear lest the house be as deserted as it looked—in the spacious living room; she was huddled in a big chair, against the wall opposite the great windows that looked eastward across the dunes, staring out at the brightening sunrise.

She didn't seem to see him standing in the doorway. He called hoarsely, "Athalie!"

The girl raised her head, saw him, and sprang to her feet in a quick scared motion. She took a recoiling step.

"It's me. Ralph." He came toward her, and she did not retreat again, but her gaze on him was feverish and blank. There were sleepless shadows under her eyes, her bright hair was unkempt, her makeup smudged, some of her fingernails broken and untrimmed. Half-consciously Degnan noted those details and could not understand, until he remembered that she, like all Earth, had gone through the night of terror, the hours of the hyperspace bombardment. He hesitated. "Is your father here?"

She shook her head, said painfully, "He went with the Fleet. He had a reserve commission, and he got them to take him. He went on one of the battleships—I don't remember which one."

DEGNAN was prey to a sinking feeling. He would greatly have preferred, just now, to talk to Charles Norton, who was his friend and whose combination of hardheadedness and imagination he respected... But Athalie would have to do. Certainly the quarrel they'd had counted for less than nothing now.

He said with an uncontrollably pounding heart, "And your father's yacht—did it go out with the Fleet?"

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"No. The guns weren't ready, or something. What do you want?" she demanded uncomprehendingly.

"I want that ship," said Degnan, and the way he said it made her take another backward step. Her lips moved and relaxed without framing a question. "It's still on his field? Guarded?" She nodded, finally got out, "Why?"

He ignored the query. His whole being was centered on the need to get that ship—perhaps the only space-going vessel left on Earth now which had a full-gravitic drive, which might carry him through Earth's defense and out of reach... "Listen. They'll let you in to look at the ship, won't they? And maybe me with you. You've got to help me get to the Azor's controls."

She went on staring at him; then a spark of the old strong-willed Athalie flared up. "You must be crazy! Where have you been? What's happened? What can you possibly—"

He took a deep breath, realizing the strange figure he must be—drenched from head to foot, haggard, the awful burden he carried showing in his face. "I want to go to Venus," he said, and regretted it the same moment; now he would have to explain, and he had hoped to get Athalie's help without that.

"Now I know you're crazy. Venus! Nobody can go to Venus. The Venusians are coming here..." She broke; her body shook with sobs, but her eyes were dry and over-bright.

He might have tried to comfort her, but somehow the strength wasn't in him. He stood gazing down at her, and in terse sentences, jealous of the time that was trickling through his fingers—in a toneless voice, as one telling a story already grown old, he related what had happened since yesterday evening; told her why he must go to Venus, or failing that at least leave Earth, if he died in the attempt.

She quieted, and as he finished, shrank back against the wall, pressing her hands against it. His eyes bored into her, seeking; but he could not tell whether she believed or not.

AFTER A silence that was not long, but seemed so, Athalie said, "But even if it's true—it doesn't make any difference. Everything's over anyway. We—Earth is going to surrender."

"The hell you say!"

She nodded abstractedly, as if he had agreed. "It was on the radio a few minutes ago. A message from Venus: if we don't surrender, they'll start the bombardment again at one o'clock. We couldn't stand it—you see that, don't you? They broadcast the message, because the censorship is down—we've all got to make up our minds now. And the Nations' delegates are meeting to decide."

The world seemed to rock around Degnan. He muttered hoarsely, "The Fleets..."

"They can't win. The radio didn't say that, of course—but everybody knows it's hopeless." She straightened suddenly and grasped at his arm with nervous strength, her manner fevered again. "Ralph! The Venusians have promised to let some people go, to live on Mars. They'll let us go if they think we're on their side. Help me think, Ralph—how can we make them understand we're in favor of surrendering?"

For a moment Degnan felt hollow, sick and weak inside; he realized how tired he was... He set his teeth and caught Athalie by both shoulders in a grip that made her cry out sharply. "That's enough of that!

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Mankind isn't ready to quit yet. And you—you'll do one last thing for your own world before you start bowing and scraping to Venus!"

Athalie had wilted. He felt her trembling, knew it was fear of him and did not relent. Nothing mattered now except his purpose.

There was a half-mad light in the eyes that met his—or perhaps they only reflected his own. She faltered, "Don't, don't—I will."

He let her go, feeling at last a touch of pity for her. Last night had shattered her brittle self-confidence, left her subject to only one motive: fear.

He ordered, "Take me to the *Azor*."

It was Degnan who took the wheel of Athalie's sky-blue speedster and pushed it at savage speed over the road that wound along the shore. But as Charles Norton's one-time private landing field came in sight, he slowed and flung at the girl:

"I'll be an engineer friend of yours, who wants to see—informally—if the ship mightn't be usable after all. I can talk some technical language, and you vouch for me... At least they'll be thrown off guard."

There had been a low fence around the field when he had seen it last; the military had heightened that and topped it with barbed wire. One-gate was closed and barricaded; beside the other one, a flimsily-built guardhouse. And beyond the fence—the *Azor*, its once golden hull painted space-black, a spidery temporary scaffolding about it. Work was evidently at a standstill now. They wouldn't have touched the engines, though; and even if the ship weren't sealable he could fly it in a vacuum suit.

HE WAS WELL aware that he had no chance of getting to Venus alive. But he knew the *Azor* of old, knew what its powerful drivers would do; there would be an excellent chance of shooting past the units of Earth's defense patrol that had not been drawn off by the offensive, into deep space, and once out there—set a collision course for Venus and give the engines full power. By the time the fuel was exhausted, the ship would have a velocity of over five thousand miles a second. Even if it were blasted to fragments when it hit the Venusians' barrage, the fragments would still have the momentum of its two thousand tons.

And if that death plunge should carry him close enough to the enemy world— There was a question which, when it first occurred to him, he had hastily crammed back into the darkest recess of his mind; he brought it into the light now. If he were to think, with deliberate conviction: I am at Combined Fleet Headquarters —now!— would that thought set off the reaction, before the brain censor could label it a lie?

He set the brakes in front of the gateway and reached for the door-button, eyes still fixed hungrily on the space ship. Then a scuffing sound jerked his head around—and he saw the car's other door already open, and Athalie outside, running, stumbling across the sand toward the guardhouse, crying shrilly, "Help! Help! There's a crazy man out here!"

For only an instant, Degnan sat stunned. The thought streaked through his head: I should never have looked away. If I'd only kept my eyes on her she'd never have dared— But there was no time for regrets. A uniformed figure had appeared at the door of the guard-shack, and the sun flashed on metal in its hands.

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Degnan slammed full power into the drive unit and spun the wheel; the car whipped round with violence that almost blacked him out. There was only one way to go and that was back, a quarter mile of naked shore before the road dipped from sight, and he took that road at a hundred, a hundred and fifty miles an hour, tires screaming on the curves. He thought he heard a shout behind; but he was counting on the fellow not shooting before he found out what was up. For a wild moment, he had thought of crashing the fence; but then the guard would certainly have opened fire.

The rising ground hid him, and he released held breath. But he didn't slacken the deadly pace for half a mile more; then, within sight of the Norton house, he swung the car off the road, careening into the ditch where it would be partly shielded from aerial view by a couple of scrubby pines, and sprang out. His weary muscles responded poorly, but he drove himself into a dogged run—inland, toward the city.

Within minutes the hunt would be up—on the ground, in the sky, many against one, and sometime the lone quarry must stop, rest, while the ring closed in...

Skirting a tree-bordered road, he slowed at last to a walk. The road and the air above seemed deserted, but he kept under cover of the trees. Ahead, the sun climbed higher—a weird sun, a white disk through the high pall of dust that hung over the Earth.

SOMETIME later, he was in an outlying business center; normally its streets would have already been crowded at this hour, but today there were few people, and those hung in knots on the street-corner or crept aimlessly about, glancing up in furtive fear at the pallid sky. Among them, Degnan's bedragglement and his haggard look was not conspicuous; his clothes had finished drying as he ran, and he had halted briefly to brush away the incrusted salt. He breathed more deeply; by losing himself among Los Angeles' millions, he would at least gain a little time.

Much further on, in a little park, he crept beneath a dense thicket of bushes to rest. The leaves sagged tiredly under a film of sooty dust, and as the day wore on it was growing crushingly hot, as before a thunderstorm. At one o'clock—

With continuing effort Degnan held himself just above the edge of sleep, letting his body rest while his mind stayed feverishly awake. Could he ever sleep again? For he might dream— An hour or more by the white sun he lay there—his watch had stopped since his plunge into the sea—and at the end of that time got stiffly to his feet and went on. Aimlessly now, for there was no use trying to put more distance between himself and the point where he had last been seen—the point around which they would have drawn a circle, within which he must be. Perhaps they already knew, by a process of elimination, that he had gone into the city.

He knew now that no one on Earth would believe his story. Athalie... She had not believed—not that it would have made any difference; she was too far gone in hysteria. She hadn't even been scheming to get him caught, back there; she had only been running away.

Here and there on the streets he saw pairs and groups of new citizen militia, grim-faced, with arm-bands

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and rifles, often accompanied by regular police robots. The night just past must have created a problem of order the regular forces couldn't handle; there would be many who, like Athalie, had lost their heads completely, and their panic could take unpleasant forms. Human civilization had been shaken to its roots. And over every effort to hold it upright now lay the shadow—the new Venusian ultimatum.

Somewhere on Earth, out there under the Pacific, no doubt, the United Nations' delegates were meeting under that shadow. And in each of them—the poisonous thought: "They've promised to spare a few. If one should speak out now for surrender—"

Those men would surely reject such a motive with revulsion. But there was another, more insidious thought: "Man's time has come, to go the common way of a million other species, of the dodo and the tyrannosaur—outclassed and replaced. What use to struggle against a higher life form?"

IN ALL THE millennia of his blundering, bloody history, man had achieved no more than the vision of detached intelligence, emancipated from the blind compelling forces that rose constantly out of his unconscious to mock him with apehood. The unconscious is the larger part of *Homo sapiens'* mind; there had been dreams of a *Homo superior* to come some day... But the Over Race had such intelligence *now*.

Some Earthly psychologists had claimed—and the Venusians had never denied—that the brain of the Over Being was actually inferior, in absolute potential, to the human. But their potential intelligence was one hundred per cent realized and uninhibited by feelings; it wasn't that they lacked emotional drives, but their emotions were on the conscious level, the intellect dominant.

The history of Venus was relatively short, as the Over Race was a recent mutation of their lesser kin whose psychic structure resembled that of men. But that history was one single purposefully rising curve, without the waverings and cyclic reversions of man's past; on Venus there had been no dark ages, no great divisions and wars. In the absence of the factors which had made introspection a hissing and a byword among Earthly psychological methods, the science of mind had led technical achievement—but that too had advanced on the rising curve. That the first ships to cross space had been Terrestrial was perhaps only an accident; under their cloud blanket the Venusians had had little idea of astronomy, no direct knowledge of stars and planets.

That was a basic environmental difference. Through all his wanderings and dark ages, man had seen the stars overhead, and dreamed dreams; he had been at last almost ready to reach out for the stars...

That was the last and greatest prize at stake in this last war: the right to fulfill that human dream. Only for the Venusians, if they won, it would be no such fulfillment, but only another episode in the smooth mechanical functioning of their total intelligence.

Yet, for all their superiority, they had made one basic mistake in the field where they were strongest; Degnan, on whom the error had been made, could recognize it now. They had wholly misunderstood the duality of the human mind, supposed that knowledge erased from the conscious would no longer affect the

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subject's motives or actions. But human psychologists, who had fumbled at the gates of the unconscious for centuries, knew that to it belonged the complex of blind forces which the old theologians had called "conscience", and to which various names had been given since Freud's pioneer hypotheses; by any name it was the same, a power greater in the end than merely conscious reason or will. The Over Race could not be expected to see that; their mentality was by definition conscienceless...

THE SIGHT of a squad of armed *militiamen* jarred Degnan out of a sleep-walking bemusement and made him step quickly into the doorway of a cafe, to busy himself holding matches to a waterlogged cigarette. The cafe was open, and he glimpsed a lighted television screen inside; he realized then two of his own most immediate problems—he must eat if he were to have the strength to keep going, and he must know whether a general alarm had gone out for him.

In the latter he was almost incredibly lucky. He had scarcely collected a hasty meal and sat down inconspicuously in a corner—fortunately the cafe was an automat—when the screen blazed with an announcement, at once printed and spoken for extra emphasis:

"The persons whose pictures will be shown immediately following are slaves of Venus and traitors to Earth. They are believed to be somewhere in this city. All citizens are requested to watch for them and assist in their capture dead or alive."

A series of over a dozen pictures, with names, ages, other data, displayed for a minute or two apiece. Among them Degnan recognized the red-faced Clark; and last in the series was Margaret Lusk. Degnan's heart contracted strangely as her image filled the screen; it was a moving picture, breathtakingly real, and it must have been taken some time ago, before she had gone to Venus, for in it she was smiling with a carefree gayety he had never seen in the brief time he had known her, and in the background were glimpses of a summer landscape of Earth...

Then a repetition of the announcement. "The persons whose pictures have just been shown... Dead or alive!"

Degnan bitterly regretted not having advised the girl to go straight to the police. But everything had seemed so simple then. Now—it wasn't likely to make any difference to her, or anybody else, before long, anyway.

The important thing was that they hadn't broadcast his picture. Perhaps that meant they still hadn't come to a decision about what was behind his disappearance; certainly, at least, it meant they wanted him alive.

If they caught him, it wouldn't be alive. It was as good as certain now that his dead body would be harmless, that the only trigger was a perceptive reaction in his living brain. By now the Venusians, as their new ultimatum showed, had written their "final weapon" off the books and were going on to victory without it.

Degnan froze; the telescreen now showed a news-announcer, and "the Fleets" had come crashing into his consciousness.

THE ANNOUNCER'S face had an ill-hidden strained, hunted look. "...that military operations which began around Venus at eight o'clock Pacific Time had practically ceased. Some units of the Combined Fleets,

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including a number of cruisers and lighter craft, were reported regrouping between Venus and the Sun, with a good chance of returning safely to Earth. The two battleships, *San Ch'ieh* and *Yucatan,* previously thought to have escaped the Venusian barrage, are now definitely known to have been lost..."

Mechanically, Degnan glanced at the clock beside the telescreen. It was eleven o'clock; three hours since the Fleets had contacted the enemy.

And it was evident that the Fleets had been destroyed. At the moment he didn't even care much about learning the details; he only half listened as the announcer went on, in a taut unnatural voice, briefly reviewing the disastrous Battle of Venus. Little enough was known—only that the Over Race had produced some new and frightful wizardry, that Earth ships had exploded and disintegrated in apparently clear space still a quarter of a million miles from the enemy world, attacked by something which neither ordinary equipment nor that hastily rigged up to cope with hyperspace missiles could detect or fend off. With what he alone knew, Degnan could guess at the nature of that attack. A variation on the hyperspace principle, pulsating fields projected by devices too small to register on detectors until it was too late; the ships must have torn themselves apart as portions of their structures ceased to obey the same physical laws as the rest...

Within those three hours the last of the great battleships, Earth's pride and power, were dead. One of those ships, given ten minutes inside the enemy's defenses, could have reduced the part of Venus inhabited by the Over Race to something resembling the surface of the Moon; but they had never had a chance to get that near, had never, after the first contact, had even a chance to win free again.

With a shrinking foreboding, Degnan glanced round him, covertly studying the faces of the other people in the cafe. In them he did not find the shock and unwillingness to believe that he felt himself—but then these people had, no doubt, heard earlier reports and had time to grow familiar with catastrophe. He did see an ominous blankness, a helpless, hopeless fixity in the eyes that watched the screen, that might mean resigned despair—might mean the end. If people like these, a couple of billion of them in all the lands of Earth, were ready to give up, it would be their decision that counted. The delegates' votes would be cast according to what the observers in their various countries reported on the state of mass feeling, on the results of hurried surveys, the resolutions of local political organizations... It was obvious that, as Athalie had said, the censorship had been removed, complete freedom of information restored; that at least was a heroic gesture in what might be man's last hour.

DEGNAN compelled himself to finish eating and drinking, and went into the streets again, under the veiled noonday sun. He had to keep going—the more nearly he was approaching the end of his strength, the more surely he had to keep moving; if he stopped for long, he might sleep, and sleeping be captured. But as long as he was awake and in command of himself—Degnan's hand tightened on the pistol that reposed in his pocket.

He wasn't much worried about the militia now, and was sure he had nothing to fear from the bulk of the people he passed, or who passed

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him by—merely wandering aimlessly, like him, or going mechanically about business that no longer mattered. He wondered what they would do, if they knew what walked among them—run screaming for non-existent safety, or merely stand rooted in a numbness beyond fear?

The pale sun had passed the zenith; the air hung dusty, hot and heavy as the air before a storm, unshaken in the abnormal silence that lay over the city. But in that silence Degnan heard suddenly an explosion of voices, a murmur that rose and swelled with bursting tension. He saw a cluster of people on the street-corner ahead. They pressed round a news-vending machine; sheets fluttered, were snatched and torn as the crowd jostled and grew.

Degnan sensed that the storm had already broken. Careless for the moment of attracting attention, he grasped an arm on the outskirts of the mob: "What's up?"

The man turned with an unseeing stare, then gestured at a paper that was held briefly aloft by someone, its headline vivid:

UN REJECTS VENUS DEMAND

Somehow he was a couple of blocks further on, hearing the same story from a public newsscreen. Ten minutes ago the Nations' delegates had voted unanimously against surrender; perhaps their decision had been made much earlier, but they had delayed, gaining time.

The crowd collected in front of the screen blocked the street, but even now, after the first stirring, they were surprisingly quiet. Most of them wore the same still, set expression that Degnan had seen and tried to analyze before, but now, looking from one to the other, he saw those faces with new eyes. Resigned they were—resigned to suffer and die if it must be, without shouting and fanfares, but not to yield.

And in him rose a feeling long unfamiliar—a sweet and poignant sense of pride in his own kind. If man were about to pass into extinction, he would not go like the dodos that bowed their heads under the clubs, but as the last tyrannosaur or the last sabertoothed tiger must have perished—fighting.

DEGNAN felt clearheaded once more, stronger; it was as if a part of his burden and weariness had been taken from him. The spirit of Earth's peoples, expressed in that unanimous vote—even if their unity should mean no more now than that of the Five Nations of the Iroquois or of Sitting Bull's confederacy had meant against the white man's rifles—was something to remember to the very end.

Someone in the crowd shouted, loud above the rustle of voices, and pointed into the sky; and many, Degnan among them, looked up in time to see a great ball of fire that fell through the overcast, seemed for a moment striking at the city, then veered away and vanished into the west.

The voices blended in a long sigh. The torment had begun again, and this time there would be no reprieve... Presently there were other flashes in the clouds, moanings and whistlings far up in air, the hurtling fire-trails of last-ditch interception missiles rising from Earth itself. With what the defenders had learned and the preparations that must have been made in over twelve hours' respite, it should be possible, for a time, to destroy most of the enemy projectiles or at least deflect them away from the great population centers; it might even be days before the

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world's defensive stores were exhausted. But it would be folly to hope that the Over Race was not ready to carry on the bombardment that long, for as long as they needed to.

Degnan stood motionless, face upturned like the rest; but inside him was a sudden turmoil. It was as if the sight of that first fireball had tripped a spring in his head, even as a similar spectacle had last night—but then the spring had been set by Venus. This time was different; there was no flash of memory lighting up the dark places of his mind, but facts he knew long since were falling into place with swift precision.

Abruptly he whirled, pushed his way ruthlessly out of the crowd and began to run.

He pounded through deserted streets and past other skyward-staring groups clustered round the news centers, while above the lightning flickered, up there where the Battle of Earth was being fought. He no longer saw it. Before him danced images from memory, and most constant among them was the vision of Margaret—a queerly superimposed picture, that, of her face as he had seen it last in reality, shadowed by horror past, and as she looked at him from the screen, smiling unafraid in a world that was gone. And in his ears was the echo of words she had spoken last night.

And there was a mathematical certainty. The end of the first hyperspace bombardment had come shortly before midnight—bare minutes after Degnan had arrived at NAMI headquarters. For some six hours, then, the Venusians had held their fire without explanation.

To Degnan the reason was clear. They had discontinued the assault lest it interfere with the functioning of their final weapon. Forced at last to assume that something had gone wrong, they had sent the ultimatum, allowing another quarter-day for its acceptance, during which Degnan might still conceivably accomplish their plan. And now at last they had given him up...

But they could not have known what time he got to the NAMI office. No matter how uncanny their ability to foresee probabilities—and they had shown it amply in the scheme they had built around him—they couldn't have calculated that closely, if for no other reason than that his involvement with their own agents would have upset all timetables.

Unless—

Margaret saying: *"Sometimes I can feel it trying to creep back..."*

If that had been a post-hypnotic effect, it meant nothing. But if it were what she had seemed to think it was, if she had been—possessed—by an alien mind millions of miles away, on Venus—then the Venusians could have known through her. It seemed impossible, but it made the picture complete. Degnan had judged her telepathically sensitive; and now he could guess, for the first time, why she had been returned to Earth with him.

And she had helped him escape—why? Degnan winced. But it didn't matter. What mattered now was to find her, use her in one last attempt...

AS DEGNAN ran, there settled on his shoulders a new burden of responsibility, and that which he had had to bear before seemed light. For he was about to take the fate of worlds deliberately into his own hands.

Pounding heart and straining lungs told him he couldn't keep up this pace much longer—and there

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must be miles to go; he was still only roughly oriented in the unfamiliar section of the city to which his wanderings had led him. Grudgingly, he slowed to a rapid walk. Public transportation seemed to have vanished, and there were very few vehicles of any kind moving; Degnan glanced wistfully at the occasional parked cars, but to appropriate one would take time and tools he didn't have.

Ahead of him walls and windows were suddenly lit by a flash far brighter than the murky day. He looked back into the west, and saw there a cloud rising, an immense inverted cone of steam and spray, losing shape as the fire within it faded, dwarfing all the city's buildings. A hyperspace projectile had barely missed and had fallen into the ocean.

Moments later the ground jarred and shook with a force that flung Degnan to the pavement. He heard the tinkle of shattering glass and from somewhere the prolonged roar of collapsing structures. Dust and plaster fell from overhead. He scrambled to his feet and broke into a run again.

Three quarters of an hour later, spent from haste and from struggling through streets half-blocked with rubble, he reached his goal.

The small hotel looked deserted, though it was practically undamaged, having lost no more than a few windows. Degnan panted up the stairs—and paused in dismay; the door of the room where he had told Margaret to stay stood ajar.

As by its own will, his hand dipped into his pocket and came out with the pistol, slipped off the safety catch. Dead silence all around. He pushed the door wide with an abrupt motion, and looked into an empty room, almost as he had seen it last. A picture hanging askew, a lamp toppled—but that was no doubt caused by the temblors just past. Intuitively he knew she was gone, and at the same time his mind refused stupidly to grasp the possibility—gone without leaving any word? Or taken away?

Then a scuffing sound from behind warned him; he spun and recoiled inside the room, catching a flashing glimpse of the half-dozen men in police uniforms and civilian clothes who had appeared almost soundlessly. Degnan heaved a table against the door just as a crashing impact sprung the latch. A second blow jarred the heavy table back a couple of inches. Then Degnan took aim at the door, just above head level, and fired.

A sound of hasty steps and silence again, broken only by a mutter of voices in which he could catch no words.

He was in the bag. The room was on the third floor, and even so there'd be others posted around. This was the end...

"WHAT'S THE matter, Ralph? Can't we talk this over?"

Jay Marlin's voice from the hall outside. Degnan shifted his grip on the pistol butt, grown slippery in his hand. He answered in a flat voice, "No. I'm afraid not, Jay."

"Listen—we've got plenty of guns and gas out here, but we don't want to use either one. There are some who think the Venusians got to you, Ralph; but I don't believe it, I don't believe you'd turn against us. Whatever's happened, it can't be as important right now as a defense against the bombardment. And you're the only man that can give us that, the only man that can save Earth!"

How close that was to the truth and yet how grotesquely far away! He was not Earth's salvation but its

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greatest danger. Try to explain that? He remembered Athalie's unbelief and treachery. The chance was too great, the danger too monstrous. And yet—

He was silent, trying for a moment to put everything else out of his mind and look sanely, objectively at the thought that had come to him, trying to be sure it was not just that he was cracking up, his personal urge to cling to life getting the upper hand and urging him to grasp at a hope that was not there.

He said from a dry throat, "There was a girl here—"

"She's all right. We picked her up early this morning."

So Margaret had already been in their hands when her picture was broadcast. They would have suspected he might come back here, sent out the picture in hopes of increasing the probability. And they had guessed right, without knowing all that was at stake.

"Jay."

"Yes?"

"Maybe we can make a bargain."

"Name it!"

"I've got to have a solemn promise. Let me talk to that girl for a little while—half an hour. It doesn't have to be alone, just undisturbed. At the end of that time, I'll go quietly to CFHQ, unless—and you've got to promise me that, too—unless by then the bombardment has stopped."

There was a brief pause; then Jay Marlin said, "My word on that wouldn't do you much good. I'll have to call headquarters; that'll take a couple of minutes. These other men will stay right where they are. All right?"

"All right," said Degnan. He didn't move, but stood facing the door, the automatic in his hand.

After a lifetime, the other was there again. "Ralph—it's okay. I talked to General Fleming himself. He promises you'll be given what you ask."

Degan let the gun fall; it thudded dully on the carpet. He pushed his barricade aside and let the door swing open.

IN THE anteroom of Fleming's office, Jay Marlin pressed his hand. "Good luck. I don't know what you're trying to do, Ralph—but good luck anyway." He wheeled sharply, and went out before Degnan could manage so much as "Thanks."

There, thought Degnan, went a man who would have believed him.

Other NAMI agents accompanied Degnan into the office. The General was waiting, looking older than he had last night; with him was a youngish man with a smooth face and Mongoloid eyes.

"This is Mr. King," General Fleming waved a hand jerkily, "liaison deputy from Combined Fleet Headquarters. By his permission, we shan't have located you—officially—until thirty minutes from now."

King nodded, glanced silently at an expensive wrist watch.

Degnan hardy gave either of them a second look. He had eyes only for Margaret Lusk.

She was in a chair beside the General's big desk, and she looked very small and dejected. But at sight of Degnan she sprang to her feet with a tremulous glad cry.

"Ralph, Ralph!" She flung her arms about his neck. "They told me you'd disappeared—and I thought—"

"Easy," he said softly. "Things haven't gone just the way I figured, Margaret. I need your help again."

She raised her head and looked into his face clear-eyed. "Tell me how."

He couldn't believe, now, the dark suspicions that had burgeoned again

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not long ago—and that made what he had to ask harder. He steeled himself.

"Remember what you told me last night? About the thing that kept trying to creep back. Is it still trying?" A shadow of pain crossed the face close to his; she closed her eyes as if to shut something out.

"I think so—I'm afraid—"

"Stop being afraid—and let it come back, have control again just for a little while. You've built up a defense against it—you've got to tear the wall down now. It's the only thing that will help—and you're the only one that can do it." He was at once commanding and pleading.

She shuddered, then was quiet; but he could feel the effort she was making, the tenseness of her body. "I—I'll try."

GENTLY he seated her in the chair. She looked up at him for a long moment, then leaned back. After a little she closed her eyes, and he saw a wave of revulsion pass over her face. Her hands clenched in her lap and then slowly, deliberately unclasped. Her eyes stayed shut and she was still.

Degnan had to know how fast his time was passing. He glanced round and saw no clock, but his eye lit on King; he made a peremptory beckoning motion and pointed to his own wrist. The other man's slanted eyes read the gesture; face impassive, he unfastened his watch and handed it over.

Five, six minutes gone. "Margaret!"

Her eyes opened and stared; they were blank, blind, as they had been when he first looked into them on the *Sheneb*.

Degnan spoke to her, to the thing behind her eyes, slowly and distinctly. "I have twenty-four minutes left. When that time is up, unless by then the hyperspace bombardment has ceased and Venus is ready to surrender, I will be sent to Combined Fleet Headquarters. The Headquarters is located at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean." Out of the corner of his eye he saw the General and the liaison agent start and look at one another. He went on steadily, "Earth's oceans are water, hydrogen oxide. Their total mass is in the neighborhood of one and one-half quintillion tons, of which about one-tenth is hydrogen. One gram of hydrogen, converted into helium, yields seventeen hundred billion calories of heat..."

He added a few more rough calculations. The enemy could check and reduce them to exactitude in next to no time—if the message were heard, if the thing in Margaret's eye was not only here, in her mind, but also *there*, forty million miles away...

If they heard, and if they believed, it would take them time to decide—though far less time than men would have needed—and again time for radio signals to halt the hyperspace projectiles that were on their way to Earth now. And how long might it take for a thought to cross space? The speed of light—or less, or more? There was no way of knowing. The hands of King's watch moved at abnormal speed, as if the mechanism were running mad.

Degnan began again, repeated the message almost word for word, with slow deadly emphasis. It was as if his naked will strained to bridge the gulf of nothing and make contact with the enemy.

Venusians were not men. No man quite knew how they would respond to a given situation. He was offering them, now, the choice they had hurled at Earth: surrender or die. The people of Earth were willing to

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accept death before defeat. But the Over Race was coldly logical, and Degnan felt sure that it would not respond as man had done...

THERE was silence when he finished. And in the stillness the faint tintinnabulation of small objects in the room, responding to the Earth's ceaseless vibration beneath the onslaught it was enduring. The floor shook solidly, once or twice, at shock-waves from nearer hits.

Two-thirds of his time was gone. No use repeating the threat again—the battle was already lost or won.

Perhaps the Over Race could recognize one of their errors now—an oversight that was understandable, since Venus had no water and no oceans, and the chance of a sufficiently violent explosion under the pressure of a great mass of water inducing the hydrogen-helium reaction, by a star, must never have played much part in their thinking. But of course they knew the theoretical possibility, and that once begun in a hydrogen concentration vastly above that in the Sun, it would be a chain reaction. And they could figure the effects. Within minutes after the detonation of Earth's oceans, Venus too would be dead, sterilized by the terrific outrush of heat and radiation; it was doubtful if such a blast would leave any life in the Solar System. Watchers out in the Galaxy, if there were watchers, would record a *stella nova* of unaccountable briefness...

The other mistake the Venusians had made—the psychological one—was probably a mystery to them even now.

Degnan called once more, "Margaret!"

She did not stir; she hardly seemed to breathe. He wanted urgently to see light in her eyes again, see her face alive once more, if so it be that this were the end. He grasped her shoulders and drew her erect, unresisting.

"Margaret—wake up. It's all over now." That was the truth, one way or another. "Come back to me, Margaret..." He bent to her parted lips. That seemed to rouse her; he felt her lips come alive under the kiss, her body lose its hypnotized rigidity.

He said close to her ear, "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I hurt you for nothing."

She sighed deeply. "I'm all right now. It's gone...and you're here... and I know it won't come back any more," she murmured, like a little girl being comforted out of a nightmare.

General Fleming coughed. "Colonel Degnan. Your time is up."

DEGNAN released Margaret and turned away, his face a frozen mask. Did the Over Race's misunderstanding of human mentality go so far that they had imagined he was bluffing. Or had he misjudged the Over Race—were they too capable of the hatred stronger than death, which so often in the human past had led men to go to destruction, if only to take an enemy with them?

He said, "I'm ready," and to Margaret, "Don't worry. It won't be long."

But her face was stricken. She must have sensed something behind the words; or perhaps she remembered and understood something of the message he had tried to send.

Degnan didn't look at her again. The guards flanked him in the open doorway. The General said briskly, relievedly, "We've landed a flier in the street outside. Only a few minutes—"

King, seated on the edge of the General's desk and apparently ab-

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sorbed in putting on his watch, looked up abruptly and said, "Wait." Fleming stared at him, opened his mouth; but the deputy from CFHQ gestured imperiously for silence.

Degnan tried to listen, and was hindered by a roaring in his ears. Unsteadily, he put a hand on the jamb of the door, and felt no vibration in the cool wood; and he saw the answer in the others' faces at the same time.

King reached for a phone at his elbow. "Sector Defense... That's right. Give me the Head Coordinator. At once." He snapped a curt question or two, listened, then broke the connection and asked for another, direct to Combined Fleet Headquarters. Waiting, he gazed quizzically at Degnan. "No projectiles have come in for close to three minutes now—and they were coming five or six to the minute. Now, what shall I tell the general staffs?"

General Fleming made an incoherent noise; his eyes darted from King to Degnan and then to Margaret, and his wrinkles, for perhaps the first time in their history, expressed something like fright. He looked on the verge of crossing himself.

Degnan moistened his lips. "They'd better get in touch with Venus right away and discuss surrender terms. The surrender of Venus, that is... The Over Race ought to agree in occupation and destruction of their spawning beds; it isn't in them to set their race above self-preservation. That way they'll be extinct after a generation; and we can get along with the Under Race."

Margaret moved quietly to Degnan's side, and he drew her against him; but he was bracing himself for the questions that would come as soon as King finished talking to CFHQ. He couldn't answer those questions—not until Earth ships had taken control on Venus and spiked the enemy's guns.

And then— In him was still a cold, dead weight of knowledge: Venus was defeated, but the curse that had been laid on him remained. He was still and forever an outcast from the rest of his victorious kind...

Earth would be grateful; no doubt they would be ready to give anything he asked, perhaps even the right to remain among men. He couldn't do that, though.

Margaret nestled her head against his shoulder, and looked up with the beginning of a smile on her lips. She might smile again, in a world without fear, as she had in that picture on the telescreen... He blotted the thought out.

She said, "It's really over now, isn't it? And we're all right."

Degnan looked away for a moment. She was going to be hurt too, he realized, and the sooner it was over the better. For a moment, just now, he had wondered if she knew...

He said in a low voice, disjointedly, "The end of one thing is the beginning of another. Now that the System is safe for man—before long they'll be building the first ship to go beyond. A long trip, a one-way trip perhaps, for whoever's chosen to go. And I think—"

Her arm tightened about him in a close embrace of possession and understanding. She whispered: "As long as the star ship will carry two..."

THE END

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THE SUPER POLICE STATE

By
JUNE LURIE

HOT ON everyone's tongue these days is the subject of the "welfare state" and the fear that ultimately, such a state might degenerate into a "police state like that of Russia." The idea of a "welfare state", one in which the government supervises every activity from the "womb to the tomb", is to some an abhorrent one, to others an ideal.

We know that the United States is moving toward ever greater governmental domination in so many fields. Whether this is a good or bad thing must be left each individual to decide for himself. Personally we don't think it is, but that's beside the point.

The idea we want to make is that it would be easy for a tyrannical government state to take over, over here. For there is a peculiar and fascinating aspect of American life that is generally neglected. To a great extent it is more true here than anywhere else.

The United States is a nation of machine-tool-operating amateurs or hobbyists.

Go down any street in any city in the country and count the number of home workshops there. The number is astonishing. It seems that most Americans regard the possession of a metal or woodworking shop an inalienable right, even greater than the one in the Bill of Rights which assures us of the right to bear arms. What connection is there, you ask, between hobby shops and police states? There is a strong and obvious one.

Weapons are made by tools. There are plenty of people with tools. Ergo, there are plenty of people with weapons. In fact we believe that it is probable that any hypothetical police state would insist on its citizens handing in their machine tools along with Grampa's rifle and Dad's shotgun.

It is perfectly possible for a man to construct crude weapons ranging from clubs, bows and arrows, to rifles, machine pistols and hand grenades, from a well-equipped shop. And we think that this is a good thing. The dignity, skills, rights, and abilities of the individuals of a community are everything.

So the super police state might find it a rather difficult thing to get started in a country like ours. Somewhere where these skills are rare—as in the Soviet Union—no, but in the United States, ah, that's another thing.

George Orwell painted as grim a picture of the future in his "1984" as anyone. We pray that this horrible picture may never come true. As long as Americans possess their scientific talent for making things—including weapons—we don't think it will...

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE!

By W. R. CHASE

ONE OF the most fascinating applications of the new knowledge of computing and calculating machines is that of translation. Scientists now believe that it is theoretically possible to build a machine which will translate one language to another. This is a consequence of the ability to store data, in this case vocabulary.

Since some understanding of how the human mind works is being slowly acquired, it is believed that a machine can be built which will, from the printed page, change the meaning of one language to another.

When you stop to think about it this is a remarkable feat!

Naturally there are some limitations. For one thing, style and technique won't mean anything to the machine. It will be too simple, too coarse and crude to differentiate the subtleties of esthetic style. So far as it is concerned it will have a large vocabulary so that the meaning of words will offer little problem. Also, it will be built with the necessary grammatical knowledge. This too will be simple.

The result will be a machine which can actually translate matter from one language to another. In no way will it be a beautiful, shaded translation. But it will be legible and sensible.

Nouns and verbs will be the basic tools of the machine. Consequently the translation will read rather peculiarly. Furthermore the translation will be primarily literal. Idioms and figures of speech peculiar to the given language will be translated directly. The machine will be unable to exercise any selective judgement.

The German sentence, "Es gibt ein Buch." which means "there is a book," will come out of the machine," "it give a book!" But as you can see, this will be intelligible to a reader.

It is interesting to speculate on the ultimate applications of the machine and also the possible influences it may have on languages themselves. If enough of these machines are in use, it is possible that their extremely simplified form of language may become, eventually, the language of the people who use them!

Whatever happens, the machine is coming. There is no evading it.

"No spika da English?"

"Come here. Machine will talk."

"Understand now."

"Machine spika da Inglish..."

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The ISLAND

By August Derleth

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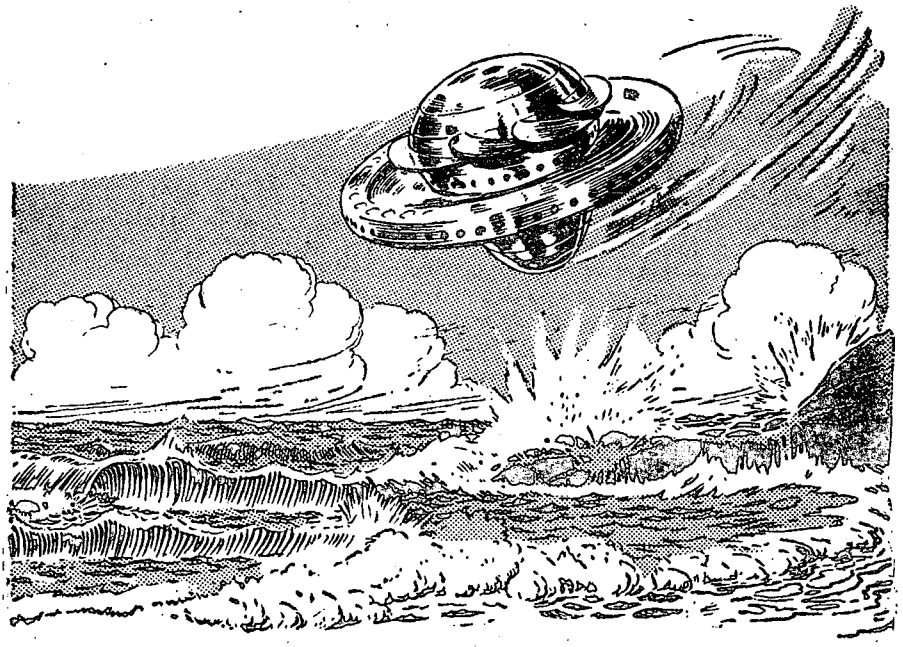
OUT OF SPACE

To the castaways no sight was more welcome than this tropic island—until a strange vessel arrived from the stars



WAGSTAFF saw the island first. He was forward, and he wasn't as weak as the rest of us. I heard him call out, harshly, "Land!"

I raised up and saw it, too. It looked like paradise. If you were to ask me now whether I noticed anything queer about it, I don't know whether I could honestly say I did. Unless perhaps it was the trees—they didn't look like anything I'd seen before, but then, this was the tropics, and anything could be in the tropics.

The sea was running us squarely toward the island.

Wagstaff's cry had roused Bradegar, too. The three of us sat watching the island loom closer and closer, until at last we were in the surf, the boat was scraping bottom, and Wagstaff, being the strongest of us, had jumped into the water and was pulling the boat toward shore. I got out, too, after a fashion; I fell in first, and the water stimulated me enough to get me back

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on my feet. We pulled and pushed and what with the water's help we got the boat up on the edge of the shore.

The sand felt good under our feet. Ever since the *Victory* went down we hadn't had much hope of ever seeing land again, but here it was, and it was only a pedant like Bradegar who would raise any objection.

"According to my calculations," he said weakly, "there oughtn't to be any island here."

"Hell," said Wagstaff. "You don't even know where we are."

We laid Bradegar under one of the trees well up from the water's edge, and we went exploring. We were too weak to go far, but there was no need to. We found a spring about a quarter of a mile inland, with cold clear water in it, the like of which we had never tasted before. It made new men of us; it gave us strength, even just a little of it.

Wagstaff had brought along a canteen from the boat. He filled it and carried the water back to Bradegar.

"Here's water anyway, Brad," he said.

Brad drank.

When he had drunk his fill he took another little sip and rolled the water around on his tongue.

"That's an odd taste this water has," he said. "You notice it?"

"It tastes good. There's nothing wrong with it," said Wagstaff.

"Not iron," Bradegar went on. "Not any metal I know about. But some chemical, I'd say."

"Poisonous?" asked Wagstaff in a taut voice.

Bradegar shook his head. "No, I don't think so. Whatever it's got in it, it's potent stuff. I feel like a new man."

He handed the canteen back and began to flex his fingers and the muscles of his arms.

"Now take it easy," cautioned Wagstaff. "You relax till we can put up some sort of shelter."

"I don't feel like relaxing. Take me to that spring."

He got up.

Wagstaff said, "You take him."

I took him.

Bradegar got to his knees at the spring and gazed at it. "Look," he said, pointing. "Did you ever see a natural spring like that?"

I LOOKED. What he was pointing at was the way the water came gushing out of the rock there; it had a tubular shape, exactly as if it were in a pipe for several inches out of the rock before it flowed free.

Bradegar took hold of the stream; his fingers closed around something.

"Feel it," he said.

I did. I felt something I could not see, like a pipe. I could follow it up to where the water dropped, free of any containing pipe.

"The island is inhabited," said Bradegar.

"What the hell is that substance?" I asked.

"That's what I'd like to know."

Bradegar sat back on his haunches and looked around him. He looked up at the trees, his eyes narrowing. Then he looked back to the ground, searching in vain for a fallen leaf. He found none. He moved to where he could get a good look at the foliage overhead; I could see his face grow puzzled.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"The trees," he answered. "I never saw trees like this. Do you know what they look like? Like somebody's imitations of real trees. Clever, too."

I went over and felt of a tree-trunk. "Pretty solid and real imitation," I said.

"Oh, yes," he muttered.

He got to his feet and examined the

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ground around the spring. There were no footprints but ours. He went around and around the spring, and at last he hit on something that looked a little different, something that had the appearance water might make if it had cut a shallow channel through the ground, or a snake's path, only it seemed to be coming to the spring and not going from it.

Bradegar set out to follow the path to its source.

"What's up?" I asked.

"There's something here," he answered.

I went after him. He was going up the length of the island, into a tangle of undergrowth which was not difficult to get through. Then just up ahead showed a clearing; it was out of sight of the beach, surrounded by trees, and it looked as if no trees had ever grown in that place.

Bradegar was ahead, running into the clearing, and I was following, when something happened. Bradegar was knocked over backwards.

"What hit you?" I asked, coming up.

He didn't answer. He got up and went forward, cautiously, hands outstretched. I saw his hands come flat up against something; I saw them moving around as if over a surface; but I couldn't see any surface. I could see clearly across to the trees on the other side; there was nothing in between but Bradegar making those queer movements in the air.

It's the exposure, I thought.

"You need a rest, Brad," I said.

"There's nothing wrong with me. Come here. Feel this."

I humored him. I put up my hands and hit a wall, an invisible wall. It was cool and smooth to the touch, like grass. It ran on both sides, and even while I stood there Bradegar had made up his mind to follow one face of the invisible wall in an effort to get around it without going back to the trees.

I STOOD watching him. He went down along that invisible wall, his hands working over the surface, till he came to a corner; then he went at right angles to the wall he had traversed. I could see him plainly. In this way he went all around the clearing, as if following a wall, and came back to where I was. He was excited.

"Extraordinary," he murmured.

"What is it?"

"Something solid. It might be a building. I wonder. It's too symmetrical to be an accident."

Just then Wagstaff came running up.

"What the hell happened to you two?" he asked.

Bradegar explained. Wagstaff looked at me, with the same question in his eyes I had had. I motioned him forward. He walked past us and ran into the invisible wall. He backed up, apprehensively.

"It's the same substance that pipes the spring," said Bradegar. "And, by the way, has either of you noticed anything at all peculiar about yourself?"

Wagstaff looked at me; I looked back.

"How about our exposure, our lack of food and drink?" pressed Bradegar. "Damn it, fellows, we were more than half dead. Do you feel any of that now?"

"No," I said.

"It was that water," said Wagstaff.

"Perhaps not water," mused Bradegar. "It's a synthetic liquid which has restorative properties, and probably all the necessary vitamins."

"Just where the devil are we?" asked Wagstaff.

"Approximately twenty-seven de-

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grees three minutes latitude, one hundred thirty-one degrees seven minutes longitude," replied Bradegar promptly. "The nearest land, according to my calculations, is Pitcairn and Norfolk Islands. I may be wrong. But there's no record of an island here."

"Well, it's here; we're on it," said Wagstaff grimly. "How about rigging up some shelter? It's a wet climate."

Bradegar nodded silently. Wagstaff was the first mate; with the captain gone, he was in charge. He turned his back on the invisible wall, walked down past the spring, and back to the beach. We followed him.

"The first thing to do is to case the island," said Wagstaff judiciously. "We'll find out what resources it has. The water's fine, to begin with; we'll need some kind of food. We'll have to set off signal fires. I'll go down and around the south end, you take the north end, Williams, and Bradeger, cut across the middle."

We separated and set out. Judging by the look of the island as we had come up to it, we had landed in about the middle of its length. It had not seemed long, not more than two miles or so. There was a fine beach all the way I walked, with trees, brush and timber like a wall pushing up not far back from the water line at high tide. The brush and trees were different from any I had ever seen; I looked for a long time before I gave up to find something that resembled the trees back home. But I never knew as much about such things as Bradegar, for instance; so I couldn't say whether the trees were what Bradegar said they were; I had to take his word. They looked all right, and they felt all right.

IT TOOK less than an hour to meet on the side of the island opposite our landing. Bradegar was waiting for us. When I reached him, we could see Wagstaff coming down from the other end. Bradegar was sitting on the sand, sifting it through his fingers, a deeply puzzled expression on his face. He didn't say anything.

"Well, what's the score?" asked Wagstaff, coming up.

"No fruit trees. No berries. Nothing we could eat," said Bradegar.

"Animals?"

"None I saw."

"Well, then, birds."

"None."

"We'll have to fish, then," said Wagstaff grimly.

Bradegar shook his head. "No. The water has everything. Do you feel hungry?"

Wagstaff considered soberly. "Come to think of it, I don't."

"I don't either," I said.

"Say, what the hell is this?" demanded Wagstaff.

"I'd like to tell you. Only, I'm not so sure myself," said Bradegar. "Look at it the way I see it. There shouldn't be an island here, yet there is. It's not a recent formation, that's certain. It has trees, rocks, a spring. The spring looks manufactured. I mean that I think we've been drinking processed and enriched sea-water. There never were trees like this—on earth. Nor bushes. The whole thing is somebody's imagination."

"You mean we're dreaming?" asked Wagstaff, flashing me one of those significant glances again.

"Oh, no, *we're* not dreaming. Someone else might be."

"Well, damn it, Bradegar, talk so the rest of us can understand you. I didn't get the chance to get an education like yours."

"Sorry. It would sound worse if I said it that way."

"Let's have it," grunted Wagstaff.

"The island's a phony," he answered.

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"Okeh. Who put it here?" asked Wagstaff sarcastically. "Orson Welles? Or maybe it came down in the rain?" He looked up. "That reminds me. There were some clouds down along the horizon. . ."

We all looked up. We didn't see clouds. What we saw was quite different. It was something that came over like a spinning top, shimmering and gleaming, like a saucer or something of that shape. It came down from above, slanting in toward the island.

"Aircraft!" shouted Wagstaff. "I told you we should have set a signal fire. Wave!"

He began to wave frantically. It was futile. The queer craft went over to the middle of the island and then came down like a feather, to disappear behind the trees.

"Did you ever see aircraft like that before?" asked Bradegar quietly.

Wagstaff stopped waving and stared at him.

"I think we'd better get out of sight," Bradegar went on, coming to his feet and making it double-time to the belt of trees.

Wagstaff and I followed.

Half way across the island, Bradegar stopped and motioned silently. Off to the left, through the trees, was that strange clearing with the invisible wall in it. Just short of tree height lay that queer saucer-like aircraft, as if suspended in space. It took me a minute to figure out that, if there were indeed an invisible building in that clearing, that craft could be resting on its flat roof. There was an opening of a sort in the side of the craft—a kind of rectangular slit, hardly tall enough for a man, or wide enough either.

Wagstaff swore under his breath. "What kind of man could get through that?" he whispered.

"Does it have to be a man?" asked Bradegar.

He went on, the rest of us after him. Nobody said anything more until we reached the place where we had beached the boat. Then it was Bradegar who suggested that we had better get the boat out of sight, hide it among the bushes, and hide ourselves, too, though most likely they had already seen the boat and perhaps even us. We didn't know.

WE SET TO and dragged the boat up into the bushes. It was not a light task, but it seemed curiously easy. Maybe we all take things too much for granted. It wasn't until then that I began to realize that a man doesn't just get up and walk around and drag heavy boats off the beach after being exposed to sun and weather four days and nights with inadequate food and water. But we did, we were doing it, after nothing more than one drink of that spring water.

The shelter took a little more time; it was built so as to help camouflage the boat, though Bradegar sensibly pointed out that our footprints were already all over the place, and it would be only a matter of time before we were discovered. By the time we finished the shelter, the Pacific night had fallen, but none of us was tired. Nor were we hungry.

Wagstaff had been pretty quiet during the activity of building a shelter. He had been thinking, trying to take in what Bradegar had said and what more he had hinted. Finally, after the shelter was done, he said what he had been thinking.

"Maybe we'd be better off if we loaded up on that water and took off, got away from this place. I don't know, but it gives me the willies."

"I'd like to see what they're like," said Bradegar. "People who can manufacture like that, and build invisible houses and run that kind of

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aircraft—what kind of people are they and where do they come from?"

"Frankly, I don't give a damn," answered Wagstaff. "The whole island gives me the creeps."

Bradegar looked at him. "And where do we go if we push off? Pitcairn? We might possibly make it, especially with that water to keep us going. But it wouldn't be easy—not nearly as easy as trying to signal a passing ship—if they'd let us, which I doubt."

"They! They! Has anybody seen anyone?"

I shook my head.

"We saw that ship come in," answered Bradegar. "Or did you think robots were running that?"

"What kind of people would make a track like that one to the spring?" I asked. "Unless they had tails, long tails."

"They might have," agreed Bradegar.

Wagstaff met my eyes again. It was plain that he thought Bradegar had been affected by exposure. Yet there was the evidence of the spring and the invisible wall and the strange aircraft we had seen.

"They're in that building," I guessed.

"If it is that."

Bradegar got up as he spoke.

"Where are you going?" asked Wagstaff.

"I'm going to see. Coming along?"

"Not me," said Wagstaff. "What I don't know won't bother me."

I was hesitant, but in the end my curiosity got the best of me. I set out after Bradegar, who had an excellent sense of direction, aided by the sound of the spring. The stars made a faint light, enough to help us see where we were going. In no time at all, Bradegar had hit the path leading from the spring, and by that time we could see a kind of illumination coming from that clearing.

Bradegar went more cautiously.

THE REASON for his caution was plain to be seen. There was light in that invisible building. It was not coming from any particular source; it was just that a glow lit up the inside. What was more, there were creatures inside, and the round bottom of the saucer could be seen in the glow of the light, still overhead, resting on the roof of the building, just as it had seemed to be that afternoon.

Creatures, I said. They weren't men. Not even remotely like human beings. Bradegar was fascinated. I wasn't. They were like lizards, somewhat; they walked upright on two legs, and they had four arms, scaled. They had thick tails that dragged a little, just the kind to make that path to the spring. Their heads, though, weren't at all like lizards; they were perfectly eliptical, with an opening for a mouth about half way down, and single tentacle hanging above it; and at the end of the tentacle there was an enormous eye. There was no hair on their bodies, but there were scales here and there, unevenly distributed.

There were just four of them. Two of them were moving around, two were sitting down. But they were sitting on air, as far as I could see. It took me a while to figure out that they had furniture made of the same invisible stuff as the walls, and probably it wasn't invisible to them. Those tentacled eyes seemed capable of seeing anything.

Bradegar stood watching them for only a little while. Then he went back the way we had come. I did not venture to speak until we had gone past the spring and were almost out on the beach once more.

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"I didn't recognize any of them," I said. "Friends of yours?"

Bradegar ignored that. He stopped short, cogitating. "But where did they come from? They aren't terrestrial, that's sure. Some parallel development, however. They seem to be vertebrates."

"What are they doing here?"

He did not answer. He stood looking at the heavens, intently.

"Look, Williams," he said presently. "Watch the stars. We're moving. Not much, but just a little. Floating."

I took that with a few grains of salt. But I did gaze up at the stars, and after a while it did seem as if we were undergoing an almost imperceptible movement. I put that down to the kind of optical illusion you suffer when you look at anything too long and get to think it's moving or duplicated, or, on looking somewhere else, you see the object reflected there. But Bradegar was moving toward the shelter.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get a little rest."

Wagstaff was sleeping and snoring a little.

After that, things happened fast.

IN THE MORNING, Bradegar was gone. Wagstaff, who woke up first, noticed it at once; he woke me to ask where Bradegar was. I didn't know. I guessed that he might have gone back to that clearing, and I told him—or tried to tell him—about what we had seen last night.

We waited for half an hour or so. Then Wagstaff decided to look for Bradegar. After all, he was still in charge, any way you looked at it, and Bradegar was his responsibility. So we set out; he went one way, and I went another; but both of us were to make for the clearing with the invisible building in it.

I came up to the clearing just in time to see Wagstaff go charging at it from the side of the spring. They had Bradegar inside. He lay on a flat surface of some kind, though it looked as if he were suspended in the air, and he seemed to be dead to the world. The saucer-like craft was gone, but one of the creatures remained inside. Wagstaff had seen all this and was now rushing the building like a bull and with as little reason, firing his pistol straight at the lizard-like figure inside.

I saw that tentacle swing around and the bulbous eye regarding Wagstaff for a few seconds. Then the creature moved straight toward Wagstaff, came to the wall, and seemed to open a door just off the path along which Wagstaff was charging, firing his pistol and shouting. The creature leveled a cylindrical tube at Wagstaff, and the first mate just disintegrated, gun and all. One moment he was there; the next he was gone.

I was so scared that I just froze where I was and slipped down into the brush, hoping that the creature wouldn't see me. He came back into the room he had left, looked critically at Bradegar, and resumed his former position, half-reclining on an invisible lounge. The whole scene looked like something which couldn't possibly happen, and even though I had seen Wagstaff blow up before my eyes, I more than half expected him to be waiting for me when I got back to the shelter.

How long I lay there, I don't know. The brush concealed me effectively enough. I was far from hungry, there were no insects, no serpents, nothing to trouble me. For a while I was just too frightened to move. But after some time, I got so that I looked up again.

I was just in time to see that saucer-like ship land on the roof. I could hear a low humming noise, like a dynamo

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far away. One of the creatures got out of the ship and went down into the room where Bradegar lay and the two of them looked him over carefully. Then both of them went up to the aircraft and got in through that slitted opening, sideways.

Then the ship rose straight up and took off again, gleaming and shimmering in the sun. Bradegar had been left alone; he lay just the way they had left him. I hesitated only a moment; then I ran around to the spot where I had seen the creature open the door and began to feel along the wall for the opening.

I grew more and more frantic as I searched, thinking the aircraft would come right back. It took me half an hour to find it. But I found it. I got the door open and squeezed inside. Then I had to find my way through the rooms with their invisible walls till I got to where Bradegar lay.

I shook him hard. He only groaned. Then I thought of that water.

I made my way back out, slopped some of it into my canteen, and carried it back to where Bradegar lay on that slab. I could feel it, ascertain its slab-like shape, even though I couldn't see it. I poured it down his throat, and in a few minutes he came around. He looked at me for a moment in bewilderment; then memory rushed back on him, and he swung off the support on which he lay.

"Come on. Let's get out," he said, snatching up his clothing from where it lay nearby.

I showed him the way.

"Take water," he commanded, as we approached the spring.

I filled my canteen again, while he went on ahead.

When I caught up with him, he was at the shelter. He had torn part of it away, exposing the boat.

"Fill those other canteens," he ordered. "Where the devil is Wagstaff?"

I told him. He stared at me for a moment, until he could assure himself that I was not trying to mislead him. Then he bent and worked all the harder.

I went back to the spring and filled the other canteens.

WHEN I returned to the shelter, Bradegar had the boat exposed and his clothes on. We turned the boat, put the canteens in, put back the things we had taken out, and began to push it and pull it back to the water.

We got it into the water at last, ran it past the surf, and got it. Each of us took to the oars, and in a little while we had put some distance between us and the island. It lay serene and beautiful behind us, soon on the horizon, soon under.

"Well," I said at last, "what are they?"

"They come from a star not too many light-years away—known as M. 360," said Bradegar. "The whole island is manufactured, put up here piecemeal in imitation of the Pacific islands in the vicinity. They're using it as an observation post, making notes on the fauna of Earth. I don't know their purpose in doing so, but in some ways they have us outdistanced in technological progress. Those walls, incidentally, aren't invisible to them. They took me last night, gave me something resembling scopolamine, and put me through it, extracting whatever information they wanted and I could supply."

"Are they friends or enemies?" I asked.

"Very likely that terminology is foreign to them," he answered thoughtfully.

He told me a lot more, about their chemistry, but I never was much good in chemistry, I didn't know half the time what he was talking about, about their star, and how they traveled

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through space in that saucer of theirs. If they got things out of him, he learned a lot from them.

Well, sir, I don't know how far we got, but it was about the middle of the afternoon, and some clouds were driving up out of the east, when Bradegar heard that low humming sound. He stopped rowing and listened.

"All right," he said. "They might see us. Get under the bow, Williams, and I'll throw that tarpaulin over you. Come on, move!"

I did what he ordered.

I could hear that humming growing louder—though it was never really loud, you understand, not like one of our 'planes—and then it stopped right overhead. After a while it went away again.

I expected Bradegar to call me out when it was safe. But he didn't. When I couldn't hear the humming any more, I looked out. Bradegar was gone. I guessed that they had taken him. Maybe back to that island, which they could disintegrate whenever they liked, Bradegar had said. Maybe back to their star I don't know. I wish I did.

I set to and I rowed again. All night.

This morning your lookout spotted me, and that's that, and here I am, as far as I know, the only survivor of the merchant ship *Victory,* out of New Orleans.

"WHAT DO you make of that fellow's story, Halliday?" asked Captain Brensham, after Williams had been taken below.

"A dream. Common enough among people exposed to the elements and the sea. The *Victory* was lost over a week ago. His time is off, for one thing. He has it six days. Furthermore, there's no island within a considerable distance of that spot. He seems to be smart enough to know that."

"Let's have a taste of the water in that canteen."

"Here you are, Captain."

Captain Brensham drank. He savored the water, took a long pull, drank again. He put the canteen down. "Tastes all right, but not fresh. Peculiar after-taste, though. Probably of volcanic origin, wouldn't you say?"

Halliday tasted it. "Could be. What did he say? It was energizing, it gave one unusual strength, recuperative powers, that sort of thing?"

"Uh-huh."

"The whole thing's the purest imagination."

"So I thought." He turned to the left. "Do you have all that down, Robertson?"

"Yes, sir. Exactly as given."

"That's all. You may go."

A knock fell on the door of the Captain's cabin. It was opened to a sailor, who stood at respectful attention.

"Captain Brensham, sir, the lookout reports a strange aircraft off starboard. It resembles a gigantic saucer, traveling at high speed."

For a moment the captain stared at him. "My God! This thing is catching. How did he hear that story? Hallucination, Wentworth—pure hallucination."

He struck the table before him lightly with the flat of his hand. A crack took shape in its surface, widening under the force of his blow.

"Hallucination, sir. Very good, sir."

The sailor withdrew.

The captain stood staring at his table. Finally he looked up.

"That water, Halliday?"

"I poured it away, sir."

Captain Brensham took a deep breath. "A dream," he muttered. "But what a dream. And what if it were true. But we couldn't admit that, could we?"

He went out, stiff as a ramrod.

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THE GRAY LEGIONS

By Mallory Storm

One day you may walk out of your door and see Martians marching up the road. If so, remember Dale Swift — and act accordingly!

THE MARTIANS came on Thursday—from somewhere. Nobody knew where they came from; or even that they were Martians. They streamed down all over the face of the earth, maybe; or maybe just into our mountains and woods some seventy-five miles north of New York City.

That was the point. We didn't know. Of all the suffering that followed—all the agony and hardship and bewilderment—that I think was the hardest to take. We didn't know.

I'd come up into that country to write a book. Things were bad. I hadn't done any writing for a long time. I was living off my last royalties, drinking too much, letting the Greenwich Village gang throw parties and tell me how good I was. But you're as good as your last book, and mine was on sale in the bargain book stalls for thirty-nine cents. It was time to get going again.

I rented a little white house up here by a lake; the lake was owned, evidently, by a lot of mosquitoes that wouldn't let you come near it. That was good, though. I belonged in the little white house pounding a typewriter.

When I wasn't doing that, I roamed the hills meeting the people. The people! Man! They were fascinating. I began to wonder where I'd been all my life. Not where I belonged certainly. That was up among these hills writing about these primitive folks, quite a few of whom had never seen a radio receiver.

But the Martians came on Thurs-

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day and I was too busy to think about the people in the hills. I'd slept late that morning and I stepped out on the porch beside the lilac bush just in time to see them marching up the road. That's how it was. I walked out and saw them marching up the road.

My reaction? Well, what were yours the moment you first saw them? The day they marched up your road or your street and into your house? Did you notice first the dryness about them? The look of having lain in a hot desert for days on end until they should have been dead rather than marching up a road in perfect formation.

That was what I saw first; the naked dry hardness of their skin; the lidless yellow eyes; the thin legs and the strange weapons. I blinked and asinine thoughts came into my mind. Asinine and stupid because I still didn't *know*: *What have we here? The gray legions of death marching back from some shadowy bivouac.*

I didn't know whether it was some gag or an hallucination. After all—did you jump up and down and yell "Martians" when you first saw them?

Four of them turned in at my gate. Four of those now—famous expressionless faces floated close to me. Arms like steel beams covered with old leather gripped me from two sides.

I yelled, "Now listen! What the hell!"

One of the arms went up and one of the strange weapons crashed down on my skull. I went out in a blaze of light.

MY HEAD was in somebody's lap. It ached miserably. I opened my eyes and saw dark hair and a pale, piquant face above me. The girl sat on the ground with her ankles crossed and my head was in the V of her lap.

I closed my eyes—opened them again, and croaked: "Hello. I know you. You're the girl who lives up on the horse farm. I saw you in the yard the other day."

Her smile was like something pasted across her face; not insincere, but as though her mind were on something else. "Peg Lawrence. You're that writer—Dale Swift—aren't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"We weren't sure you'd not been killed when they brought you here. We could hardly find a pulse beat. Then it got stronger."

"One of those clowns slugged me. What is this? What goes on?"

Her blue eyes were filled with a bewilderment, a fear—just as all the eyes in your town were filled with fear at first. "We don't know. We just don't know. They came and went into all the houses. Some of the people fought and were killed. The rest they brought here."

I dragged myself up into a sitting position. For a while I couldn't see anything because the world spun like a top. I clawed at the girl for support and then there were other hands holding me steady. I opened my eyes. There were an old man and two younger women bending and holding me.

"I'm all right now. Thanks."

I LOOKED the place over as I explored the bump on my head with gingerly fingers. It was a cow pasture, only now the cows were gone and it was full of people. All kinds of people: old and young, men and women, children and infants. Probably twenty acres of flat land. The fence was not for cattle, though. A ten-foot barbed wire netting fastened to brand new steel posts.

And stricken, dazed, wandering people. Just like the ones you saw.

Peggy Lawrence got up too. She

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appeared to be under the influence of narcotics. I was dazed too. So stupid I repeated my previous question: "What goes on?"

Peg's blue eyes were flat and glassy. "I wonder what happened to my mother."

"She isn't here?"

"Only father and I. They killed father."

"Good lord!"

Dull eyes. A flat voice. "Mother went to New York this morning—early. I wonder where she is...."

"Safe, probably."

The eyes widened suddenly. Her throat tightened and she set her teeth together: "THEY KILLED MY FATHER!"

The screamed-out words didn't bring too much attention. There were words being screamed out all over the place. I put an arm around her. She threw me off and stood like a young colt hemmed in on all sides. Terrorized. I got hold of her again and felt her strength and the power under the curves of her body.

"Don't. Don't touch me!"

"Stop it. That doesn't help."

I drew her toward a rocky brook that cut the pasture nearby. I pushed her down on a rock and held her while her body stayed tight and then loosened up gradually. Her head drooped.

"It's all right. I'm not going to cry."

"Cry if you want to. It might help."

"You don't know who they are either, then?"

There was despair in her voice, as though just knowing who they were would help a great deal.

"They look like fugitives from a desert chain gang." I dropped my arms and looked around. "Maybe somebody—"

"It's no use. Nobody knows."

"Somebody in this mob must have been listening to the radio."

"There wasn't anything on the radio. Not on television either. I was watching a cooking class when they came in."

Someone nearby in a huddled group was talking and two words came our way. "... the Russians."

I spoke as though answering him: "The Russians don't go naked."

THERE WAS a stir now at the barn end of the pasture. A group of them had come in and were walking slowly through the huddled prisoners. The group seemed to be a couple of officers and three guards. But the brass were different from the guards only in that they wore a sort of purple sash around their middles. Nothing below—nothing above. Just a purple sash to accentuate the obscenity of their nakedness.

Peggy Lawrence reddened and turned her eyes downward. I saw her embarrassment and tried to shield her with my arm. But at the same time, a voice out of a hard uncovered core in my being spoke wordlessly to her: *This is no time for niceties, girl—no time for lowering your eyes. This is a time to toughen up fast because we've come back down to elementals.*

That was the word. *Elementals.* Even in the chaos of this stunning displacement, some remnant of sanity within me was smart enough to figure out the score. Not modesty now, nor politeness, nor morals, nor anything else. Only survival. Elementals.

Knowing nothing, I still felt I had a solid foundation on which to build.

They were looking the people over like cattle. The two officers could have been a pair of auctioneers in a hog pen. One of them prodded a squatting man with his toe. The man scrambled to his feet and scuttled away. The two naked invaders watched with sober, intelligent yellow

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eyes and spoke to each other in an alien tongue.

They wandered on, looking over that specimen, this specimen. And talking, always talking. All business, these characters. They came to a blonde girl of possibly twenty—one out of several dozen blonde girls in the cowering mass. One of the officers took her by the hair and lifted her up. She had been partially stripped and very little of her dress was left. The officer called some facial detail to his companion's attention. There didn't seem to be any lewdness nor lust in the manner of either. They seemed only curious.

But nearby, a young man went mad.

He came charging in, shrieking, a rock in his hand. He got close enough to use the rock, but was not able to do so. One of the guards reached out two dead-gray arms and picked the young man off the ground and threw him.

He threw the young man at least fifteen feet straight through the air. The youth landed horribly, his back arching down against the sharp edge of a boulder. The crunch of bone came just before his scream. The blonde girl screamed also—tore from the officer's grasp—ran to the young man.

BUT I WAS watching the naked invaders—and learning things. This was no time for useless heroics. We were back to elementals now and somebody had to learn fast. And there were some things to discover.

These monstrosities, whoever they were, rated us strictly as animals. That was obvious. Their impersonal attitude was entirely genuine. They were not trying to show contempt; it was not an act. They rated us as cattle.

And they were smart. They were allowing themselves no moment of triumph. They were going about a deadly business and they weren't anybody's fools.

If they had hearts it was strictly for their own kind or those they considered as equals. Nor were they sex maniacs in any sense of the word. During their walk I'd seen them pass beauty on all sides with scarcely a glance.

And what would this observation—this knowledge—get me? I didn't have the least idea. I was sure of only one thing. If I had been walking through a cowed mob of these gray creatures, they'd have been studying me as though life depended on it.

After a while, they selected an elderly man and a middle-aged woman. They motioned to the guards. The guards prodded the two back toward the barn.

For questioning? I wondered.

The next incident relative to the invaders came about an hour before sundown. From somewhere, a loud-speaker blared forth in English. Either they had learned our language, or there was a Quisling in the deal.

"You will all come forward and face the barn. All of you. Come forward to this end of the enclosure."

No guards came in with whips. There was only the voice. For a time, no movement was apparent in the mass of prisoners. Only silence. Then a slow, turgid movement as of a stream of lazy water moving chips toward one end of the dirty pond.

Again the voice: "Move forward, all of you. Come to this end of the enclosure."

It took about five minutes and the invaders were patient. When we were all crowded around the barn as directed, one of the gray men appeared in the hay-loft opening of the barn. He stood silent, obscene legs spread, arms folded, looking down at us; seemingly studying us musingly. Then someone handed him a microphone.

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He lifted it and spoke: "You will all look at me. You will all look at my face and listen to what I have to say."

He paused for about twenty seconds before he went on: "We are now going to put a lethal charge of electricity into the fence around this enclosure. I wish to warn you that touching a strand of the barbed wire will result an instant death. If any of you wishes to die in this manner, you will be perfectly free to do so. You have been warned. That is all."

The creature started into the rear shadows, then turned back. "Another thing. There will be no food until tomorrow morning. You will be fed once a day, upon each morning following."

Now he disappeared for good.

PEGGY and I, who had stuck together by some common consent, moved backward with the crowd as it spread again over the pasture. As we walked, I noticed that the guard which had surrounded the place, stationed at intervals outside the fence, had formed into a unit that was marching toward the barn.

"They plan to keep us here for some time, anyhow," I said.

"You gathered that from what he told us about the meals?"

"Yes. I wonder if they'll give us any information?"

Peggy's hand was co'd in mine. "Do you think it would do any good if I asked one of them about my mother?"

"I doubt it. There can't be very many of them that know English."

Later, as we sat again by the brook, I challenged my own statement. Why had I said few of them would know our language? Because, I told myself, they were obviously alien. Okay—alien. I'd been all over the world. I knew every terrestial species that walked on two legs. Therefore, on the basis of my own reasoning, I had a right to state a fact.

"They're from somewhere out in space," I told Peggy.

"From space? But how—?"

"I don't know. Let's hope we find out some day."

It was scant comfort, but it helped. It gave me a solid foundation upon which to build my questions.

The sun went down and I thanked fate it was warm summer. There would be no suffering from the weather. There would be hunger—especially among—

A quick resolution—one to make me feel warm, possibly a little cocky. I got up off my rock and patted Peggy's arm. "You stay here a minute. I'll be right back."

I hurried away, threading a path through the crowd until I was standing under the open loft door from which the gray man had spoken. I yelled, "Hey—you up there! You with the microphone."

The gray man in view around the barn and the farm house turned in idle interest. Nothing happened upstairs.

"You up there. I want to talk to you."

I wondered if the answer would come from one of those strange weapons.

"You up there!"

The gray man appeared. His inscrutable face caught the light of the setting sun. It made him look like a stone devil.

"What is it?"

"The children and the babies down here can't wait until morning. They need milk. They've got to have something to eat. Can't you do us a favor and see that they're fed?"

He remained silent, staring down at me.

"Milk!" I yelled. "White stuff. There's probably some in the house in the refrigerator. We need several cans of it—big cans you'll find on a dairy farm."

After a thick silence, he asked,

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"How often do your young need feeding?"

"Three times a day—oftener if they're very small. Can we have some milk?"

He didn't reply. He stood there for a full minute looking over the enclosure. Then he turned and walked away.

I went slowly back through the groups of prisoners and sat down beside Peggy. She laid a hand on my arm. "That was very brave of you."

I shook the hand off. Somehow, her praise annoyed me. "Other people would have asked. They just hadn't thought of it yet."

I DIDN'T want to talk at that moment. There was too much going through my mind. Questions.

What did they want of us? Obviously this was an invasion. Yet they hadn't slaughtered us as they could easily have done. Why not? Not out of pity, that I knew. I'd seen them throw a man against a rock and break his back. Then why were we wanted?

This brought on wonderings about the scope of the attack. It was more than local, beyond all doubt. Otherwise, there would have been hell popping in this area long before now. Then how large was their bridgehead? The eastern seacoast? Wider than that, or there would at least be U.S. observation planes functioning.

I gave up conjecturing, took Peggy's hand and began walking. We moved casually about until we came to a group of fifteen or twenty prisoners who seemed to be talking more than the others. I pulled Peggy down on the grass at the edge of the group and we listened.

"Newt saw the ship. In a pasture over by Schulkill."

"One? There were a dozen."

"They came with no moon. Dark. They dragged us out of bed."

"Joe got the shotgun and fired it. They killed him with that funny little gun they carry."

"No blood. No wound."

I'm getting hungry."

"They tore Bea's nightgown—threw her into the yard."

"They wouldn't let her get her clothes."

"When will the army come?"

"Ha—the army will be here."

"The National Guard."

A laugh. "I belong to the National Guard. I'm here."

"Why don't they wear some clothes? It's...indecent. Innocent children..."

Elementals, lady.

We were jerked out of it by a scream. It was dark now and the lights of several fires weren't enough to carry. All heads turned.

"Over by the fence!"

A LONG, sick, choked wailing. I pulled Peggy to her feet and we ran towards it. A girl in a bathing suit. Bikini. Bra and shorts. Dragged out of some lake—away from an early morning swim—and brought along.

She lay on the ground, face tight, teeth set, eyes wide. Slavering. Legs stretching wide and hard. Then a gradual softening of flesh and muscle.

"She went crazy all of a sudden."

"Ran straight against the fence. I couldn't stop her."

Peg and I walked slowly back to the creek. Peg's face buried in my shoulder as she staggered along. I sat her down and after a while she stopped sobbing and quivering.

"Did you notice anything strange about that girl?"

Peggy raised her head. Her eyes questioned as the firelight flickered on the shine of her tears. "No—I—I didn't look."

"I did. She was electrocuted."

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"Don't—"

"I've got to. Listen—she was electrocuted and yet there wasn't a burn on her body. Isn't that pretty odd? When a person is killed with electricity, it fries them—burns them up. All she had was scratches on her breast from her own fingernails."

"Dale—don't, please."

"I'm sorry. You're very tired. You need sleep."

"I can't sleep."

"Yes, you can. We'll find a place."

I took her hand and we wandered around and located a grassy nook under an evergreen tree. "This will do. It's not crowded here. You lie down and close your eyes. I'll be here."

We lay side by side on the grass looking up into the dark tree above. Silent, stiff. Five minutes and I thought Peg was asleep. She hadn't moved. Then I heard the sobbing, ever so faint, down in her breast where she was trying to cover it up—hide it—smother it. I touched her.

"Peg. . . ."

The sobs wouldn't smother. They were too hot. She threw herself at me in a single explosion of grief. I caught her and held her and let her cry. All her being a hot, smoking channel through which grief poured like a torrent. I didn't say anything. I just held her and time went by and after a while I knew she was asleep. Exhausted.

I laid her down but I didn't pull away until her breathing was even, lifting her breast in rhythm. Then I lay down too and closed my eyes.

When I slept, I dreamed of my mountain people up in the hills.

DREAMED of them and there was a hand over my mouth. Another holding my arms down. I came awake in rank panic, but there was a harsh, dry whisper: "Take it easy, younker. Don't fuss up. Everything's all right."

He put his smelly face so close I couldn't miss it. The mattress-whiskers stained with tobacco juice. The amiable grin.

But the tobacco stench was attar of roses to me and the grin—in the light of an early-lowering moon—more classic than the Mona Lisa smile.

"Josh! They got you too?"

One of my mountain men. I'd gone one day off the cement and onto the black-top; off the black-top and into a road made up of two ruts overgrown with grass. When the ruts ended, I got out of the car and began walking. Into a footpath that ended also, and around me there was nothing but woods as primeval as when the Indians called them home.

I walked on, enchanted, until I got hungry and realized I was lost. I said, "This is absurd. The road is right down there and all I have to do is go back and get into my car and go home and get a can of sardines out of the ice box.

Like so much hell.

I was lost in the deep woods seventy-five miles from Times Square. I walked on and almost jumped out of my skin. A voice like a dry husk: "What are you doing around these parts, younker?"

Josh was leaning against a tree not five feet away. He was small—top-heavy with a growth of whiskers that covered all but his eyes and cheek bones. Under the mat his jaws were moving rhythmically on a wad of tobacco. He leaned on a rifle and wore a pale blue shirt and a pair of levis.

"I guess I'm lost."

The cackle. "I guess you are, younker. I been watching you sashay around in a circle for an hour or more. You'll have a path beat pretty soon."

"Would you mind telling me where I am?"

"'Bout eight miles up on Stormy.

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You got some to go yet—to get to the top."

"Maybe you'd show me the way back to my car. I'd be willing to pay you."

"Not me. I'm heading home for grub. You can come along. I got two younkers myself. Maybe one of them wants to make a dollar."

JOSH LIVED with his two sons in a log house up the mountain. Lee was eighteen, lean and hard and calm of eye; long of hair, but not as loquacious as his brother Tarp who said, "Hya," when we walked up the hill.

Lee was dishing beans out of a pot onto tin plates, setting them on a rude outdoor table. He didn't even look around.

Josh said, "Dig out another pan. Got me an outlander. Gotta find out if there's a bounty on him. Haw-haw-haw."

I stayed all night and learned about them, but it was like digging in granite with a spoon. They lived in the hills and had neighbors who also lived in the hills. They carried .22 rifles mostly and could knock the eye out of a squirrel at a hundred yards.

They drank gin—doctored up in a way the devil must have taught them. That was why I stayed all night. They'd have had to carry me home.

"We're mountain folk," old Josh croaked, "and we ain't beholden to nobody." That was after many visits, when I knew him well.

And now again that croaking laugh as Josh took his hard hand off my mouth and answered my question. "Got me? What you talking about, younker. I come looking around for you. With all these varmints clustering around, I think you'd be better off up on Stormy."

"But how did you get in? The fence is charged with electricity."

"What fence? There ain't no fence. Can't for the life o' me figure out why all these folks is hanging around."

"Josh! We're caged here like cattle."

"That's interesting. I just walked in and looked around 'till I found you."

There was a touch of insanity about all this.

"Come on," Josh said. "We shouldn't stick around none. We should sort of back out o' here."

"I can't come alone. I've got a friend."

"Bring him along."

"It's a girl."

"All right. Bring her along. My younkers ain't rampant. They've seen fillies before."

I awakened Peggy as Josh had awakened me—with a hand over her mouth. She took it surprisingly well.

"We're going out of here," I told her. "A friend of mine has come for us. Be very quiet."

We followed Josh through the sleeping and half-sleeping groups. It was like following a shadow. I held my breath as we came to the fence. It was there. The faint moonlight glittered against the steel posts on which the wire was strung.

BUT JOSH walked right through it—passed beyond it as though it did not exist.

Then I knew! *It didn't exist.* It was a phantom of the mind. A phantom of a thousand minds. But a phantom that could kill!

Josh turned and I heard his cornhusk whisper. "What's keeping you? Ain't you coming with me?"

"Yes—yes—but just a minute. You'll have to wait a minute, Josh."

I turned all my attention on Peggy. "Listen, darling—get it and get it fast. That fence isn't there at all. We just think it is. It's nothing but a reflection from our own minds."

Peg shrank back. "Dale! Are you

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mad? That girl we saw killed."

"Yes—but no burns. Don't you remember? This is how it works. Remember how the gray man made us all come to the barn and look at him while he told us about the fence. They're smart—very smart, Peg. They're way ahead of us in mental abilities. While he was talking, he suggested the electrified fence to everyone of us. Hypnotised it into our minds. It's not there but that girl was killed from *believing*—don't you understand? These creatures don't bother to build a fence. They merely put one into our minds and we're trapped."

Peg was more perceptive than I expected. She said, "But Dale—the fence was there when we came—before he told us about it."

She had a point, but still I knew I was right. "That may be true. Maybe they put the picture in the minds of these people when they brought them in. But you just saw Josh walk through it. That's proof, Peg. Together with the other things. Josh wasn't here so he wasn't hypnotized. The fence doesn't exist for him."

The old man was bewildered. "I don't know what you two are yapping about. You must be some way touched."

I said, "Peg—you watch me. I'm going to walk through the place where we think we see a fence. We're going to walk around a little before we go through and I want you to keep your eyes tight closed. Don't open them until I tell you to. And all the time keep thinking, 'It's only in my mind. It's only in my mind.' "

"I don't think I need to do that, Dale. If you can walk through it—so can I."

All right. But remember: there's no fence there. Don't flinch when you come to it. It's all in your mind."

I TOOK her hand and we walked through the fence. Peg didn't flinch. But she closed her eyes and raised her chin as we hit the imaginary barbed-wire strands. I don't know what went on in her mind but in mine was a thought: *What manner of creatures are we up against?*

Peggy opened her eyes and they were filled with wonder. She turned and looked. "It's—it's gone. Nothing there to hold all those people. We must tell them."

I pulled her back sharply. "Nothing of the kind!"

"But it's so heartless—letting them believe—"

"It's best for them. If they started running, those gray devils would probably shoot them down like rabbits."

"But so heartless," Peg repeated.

"Angel, the time has passed when kindness can be considered. It's a luxury now. No more thinking with your heart. This is a fight for survival and only the brutal have a chance."

At that moment there was a commotion over by the barn—a rattling of heavy objects. In a flash we were face-down on the ground—pushed by Josh who had moved like a steel spring.

"Quiet," he hissed. "Your standing here jawing has put us in a spot. We ought to be up in the woods by now."

We lay motionless. After a few moments we cautiously raised our heads. Lights had been spotted on the barn door and a squad of gray men were carrying milk cans out into the pasture.

"It's food for the children," Peg whispered. "The leader did what you asked, Dale!"

"Only because they want us for something. They don't want us to die. I wish I knew what they had in mind."

"That's easy," Josh cut in. "You ain't very smart, younker."

"Do you know the answer?"

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"Sure. They want slaves. They'll need food and somebody's got to work the land."

I hoped nobody could see my red face. Of course that was it! I'd been so damned clever at analyzing things, yet I couldn't dope out a simple one like that.

The lights went out and the gray men went back into the barn leaving the milk cans. They'd brought the milk but they weren't going to feed the babies.

"Let's go," Josh whispered. "Single file. Keep right behind me. Put the filly in the middle."

The moon was gone now and it was like walking into a black wall. Every step was with foreboding—fear of tripping or pitching into a hole.

BUT THE going was smooth and after a while we gained confidence in our trail-maker. We must have walked for almost an hour when Josh stopped and said, "It gets tougher from here on, but we better keep going. We'll walk slower and put the filly behind. You better take her hand."

I was amazed. "You mean you can see in this pitch darkness?"

"I dunno. Maybe it's that. Anyhow, I know where I'm going."

We were in deep woods now and at intervals there was Josh's rasping voice ahead: "Hole here—watch it.... Low branches—hold 'em or they'll slap you in the puss." At intervals we could hear the tinkling of fast mountain water but we didn't cross any.

Finally Peg's plea in the darkness: "Please! I'm—about done."

"We've got to stop, Josh or—wait a minute! I'll carry Peg. That way we can keep on going."

The oldster snorted. "Oh yeah? Who do you think you are—Dan'l Boone? Gimme the filly. Come here, sis."

Josh grunted once from sudden exertion. I couldn't see what was going on but I could visualize. Peggy was at least five feet six inches and must have weighed a hundred and thirty. Josh couldn't have tipped the beam at one-twenty. I waited for the crash.

But the old man's footsteps continued at a steady clip. And as he kept on giving me tips on rocks and holes and branches, there was no sign of extra exertion in his voice.

I was beginning to tire. My legs ached and my chest was full of fire. It was a matter of pride now, however. I'd have dropped in my tracks before letting on.

Grimly we plodded through the night.

Until Josh said, "Well, damned if we didn't make it." Then he called out, "Show a light, boys."

There were sudden sounds not more than ten feet away, a dark covering of some sort was drawn away from a doorway and a shadow loomed inside. It was the cabin.

Josh walked in and set Peggy down. Now I waited for him to drop from exhaustion. Instead, he took his .22 from Peg who had been carrying it and hung the weapon on the wall. He said, "Kind of imagine you younkers could use some grub. I sure can."

There were two oil lamps on the table. The table had only three legs, one corner of it being propped on a shelf in the log wall. The floor was earth packed solid with a few high spots that would trip you up if you weren't wary. One wall was blocked off by a pair of bunk beds upon which were mattresses and bedclothes colorless with grime. There was a single cot beside the fireplace.

WITHOUT further ceremony, Josh snatched up a plate and went to the fireplace and ladled a heap of

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beans out of an old iron pot. He said, "Grab a dish and dig in younkers. Beans is right nourishing. They stick to your bowels. Dig in."

I glanced at Peggy with some apprehension, but my fears were groundless. She was staring at the bean pot as though it contained the rarest of viands imaginable. She grabbed a tin plate off the table. "I don't have to be asked twice," she said.

Lee stood by the bunks leaning on his .22. He hadn't said a word. He watched Peggy bend over and ladle beans out of the pot. He turned his eyes away when Josh, his mouth crammed, said, "Wonder how Tarp's making out?"

My nerves were raw—on edge. I looked up to ask, "Did something happen to Tarp?"

Josh went right on eating. "I sent him off on a circle of the mountain to talk to folks. We gotta find out what they want to do. Sit around and get picked off or—" The rest was unintelligible as he had again crammed his mouth full.

"Tarp come back from the west swing about noon," Lee said. "Old Sam Flinch got killed by the creat'res. They must o' took Mable 'cause she wasn't around nowhere."

"Knew Sam would get into trouble someday, Josh grumbled, "living down near those summer outlanders. Should of been up in the hills with the rest of us."

"Tarp said some of 'em took to the idea o' getting together at Black Pond. Some was kind o' stiff-backed."

"Okay," Josh replied. "If they want to fight this war by theirselves, let 'em do it."

"Josh," I asked, "how did you find out about what had happened?"

"There's a o'd Indian named Hot Ear wanders around the mountain. No telling how he gets wind of things, but this morning he swung up here and told us some funny looking outlanders had skated in down below in fat-bellied airplanes and was raising hell in general. Said they was killing and corraling like the French and British did in the old Iriquois days." Josh went off on another thought-track and waved a spoon at his tall son.

"You know, Lee—he was damned well right. Never saw such funny looking critters in all my days. Plumb naked as jay birds and like they'd been roasted over a slow fire." He stopped and grinned proudly. "Got me one down in the low ands. Just about dark-it was. He must of wandered away, cause he was standing in a glade looking at the corpse down by Blarney's Slip. I pussied up to fifty yards and put a slug right into the top end of his spine."

"You killed one?" I asked excitedly.

"Sure did."

"You took his gun?"

"What'd I want the danged thing for? Don't know how to use it. Might hurt somebody."

"You should have gotten it!"

"And you better look to your filly. She's dead beat."

I TURNED to see Peggy lying across the table with her head on her arms.

"Put her in one of the bunks. Lee and me can bed down outside if you think she'd be sensective."

I picked Peg up in my arms. Her head fell back and she had all the appearance of a tired child too far gone to be awakened. A wave of tenderness swept me as I put her gently into the bunk. Then I myself dropped wearily down on the bunk edge. I could have slept on a picket fence.

Josh had finally finished his supper. He got up, wiped a hand across his whiskers. He stood motionless for a moment, then said, "You really want that outlander's weapon?"

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"I think it might come in handy."

"Okay, Lee. You run down and get it if it's still there. They might not have come on the creat're yet."

Lee had been covertly watching Peggy out of the corner of his eyes. Startled by his father's words, the youth jerked his eyes around in surprise. After a moment, he shrugged. "Okay, Pop." He took his gun off a nail on the wall and slouched out of the cabin.

"And you better get some sleep too, younker. Ain't no telling what'll come up tomorrow. Me—I'll put my pants against the wall outside and kind of sleep with one eye open. Don't think any of them creat'res can find us, but we won't take no chances."

I was dizzy with exhaustion. At that moment I didn't care much what happened. I climbed into the upper bunk and was asleep before Josh had taken his rifle off the wall.

THE DETAILS of transition are sometimes unbelievable—sometimes boring. But the starker ones—the exalted, and sometimes the ludicrous ones—you remember.

That's how it was with me in remembering what could be called the mobilization. I learned much about these mountain people.

I LEARNED HOW THEY FOUGHT: There were five of us reconnoitering the woods—Josh and I, with three neighboring mountaineers—all of a cut—and it was in my mind that they were ageless. Given leather pants and shirts for the levis and the faded blues, they could have been scouting for British advance guards in a different America—an America not yet born.

They moved in utter silence and I was learning, too. Five shadows drifting through the trees—four of them rich in the woodcraft of survival or sudden death.

I had learned to watch them—to do what they did. Most important, to freeze when they froze. Josh stopped suddenly with one foot in the air half a step forward. Four rifles came up in a motion held by four shadows as stiff as trees.

I felt suddenly forlorn, hopeless. I had heard nothing. There was no wind and the dead silence was like a blanket. How could one learn to hear soundless danger? It was uncanny.

Josh lowered his gun. "Hot Ear," he said.

Hot Ear? I'd have sworn there wasn't a soul within ten miles. Then Josh turned, looked over my shoulder, and said, "What's the lay, Dirty Legs?"

He must have sprung up out of the ground, but there he was and he could have killed me four times while I stood flat-footed thinking I was alone. He was a big Indian with straight black greasy hair. He wore the uniform of the mountain folk—levis and a faded blue shirt. He carried a slightly heavier rifle than the rest and I got the impression he'd been to school sometime in his life.

He talked only to Josh: "By damn! Hell's apoppin'. Got me six spooks parked down by the pond. You want to help?"

"They got those funny guns?"

"Phooey! Damn spooks sittin' in tall grass. Poor insurance risks."

"Let's go." Josh stopped then and regarded me dubiously. "Think you can keep from falling over your feet?"

I wasn't insulted. Josh was too far out of my class for that. "I'll try."

We went single file. I was the caboose. Hot Ear led the way. Five shadows and a caboose. We came finally to the fringe of the woods on lower ground. Hot Ear sank down into the swale. I crawled close. I

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wanted to be in on the planning, the laying out of the action-pattern.

THERE WAS no planning. Not a word was said. Josh pushed down on my knee, an eloquent order to stay where I was. Then the five mountain men went down on their bellies and began wriggling and pretty soon they had vanished into the hip-high grass.

I waited, feeling lonely. Down below by a small pond I could see half a dozen gray men. They seemed uncertain as to what to do. They'd been given some kind of orders and were at a loss as to how to carry them out.

That made no difference. They were through carrying out orders. One of them, evidently a corporal, raised the strange looking hand weapon and held it against his head. This looked like suicide. Was he going to kill himself?

He stood that way, motionless as though afraid to pull the trigger.

A hair-raising scream and five mountaineers grew up out of the grass not fifteen feet from the alien warriors. Hot Ear's gun thundered. The lead warrior went down.

There was no more shooting. Just swift terrible death. Josh went through space to wrap a body scissors around his man from the rear. He reached around the gray throat—jammed in the knife—all but decapitated the man. The others died as swiftly. Carnage to bring fierce joy to the heart of a bystander.

They wiped their knives on grass—rolled the bodies over by the pressure of a foot. I ran down the hill after that strange hand gun.

Josh looked up and grinned. Hot Ear was on his knees, pinching, testing. "By damn! It's not pants and shirts. It's their skin." He stared at a dead gray man. "I could skin this one out and make me some clothes. Tougher than horsehide."

I picked up the alien's weapon and held it as he had held it, against my head. There were crackling sounds—then gibberish the gray men would have understood had they been alive. Josh was peering at the gun. "Wonder if it shoots."

I turned the barrel toward the water and pressed what appeared to be the trigger. A sizzling hole appeared in the pond. The water boiled and dry grass on the pond-edge caught fire.

"Throw it in the pond," Josh said.

"Throw it away?"

"Hell, yes. That thing'd start a woods fire and burn us all plumb to hell."

I put the weapon against his ear. He cocked an eye and said, "Well, I'll be damned! A radio in a gun butt! What'll they think of next?"

I looked at the gray dead men. I'd learned how mountaineers fought. We were down to grim elementals.

I LEARNED HOW TO MAKE A FOOL OF MYSELF: They had gathered at Black Pond—straggled in out of the woods with their wives and children and they sat around in groups; not saying anything—not doing anything—just sitting there.

It bothered me. Sheep waiting for the slaughterer's knife. There would be tragedy if something wasn't done. Poor backward folks unable to conceive what had happened—what dark peril lay waiting to cut them down.

They needed the spark. Something had to be done and I was the man to do it. I spoke to Josh. He'd just set down the gin jug and was wiping his whiskers.

He got to his feet and called out, "This here feller is an outlander friend of mine. A pretty good feller and he wants to say something. Keep the younkers quiet and listen."

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I GOT TO my feet, inspired by the press of duty. I would not fail. I started speaking: "It is an honor to be with you people in this time of danger. Stark tragedy has fallen upon us. Heaven only knows where these gray fiends came from. Possibly some day we'll find out. Also, we have no idea of how large the invasion is. The whole nation—the whole world may be in their grip."

The mountaineers stared in silence. Their interest warmed me. I was getting to them. All they needed was leadership.

"But I know that long odds mean nothing to you people. Your ancestors fought at Lexington. They faced great odds at Ticonderoga. You are of the same mettle, my friends. You will not flinch from your duty. And that duty is *fight—fight—fight!*"

I doubled my fist to show them what I meant and stopped to measure the effect. There was dead silence. Then the voice of a wiry mountaineer who passed the gin along and spoke to Josh: "This younker ain't very well informed, is he?"

Hot Ear was sitting nearby. He said, "By damn! Ain't heard a speech like that since the State Trooper tried to get me back to the reservation."

Josh got up and took me by the arm. "Come on, younker. I been kind of neglecting you."

He led me away and I heard a voice speaking in wonder: "He don't even know we're fighting the Martians."

We went down by the water and Josh said, "We been getting scraps of information, younker—the radio and such."

"Radio!"

"Uh-huh. Henry Chunt's little filly's got one of them amatoor radio sets. She talks to people and they talk back. The filly's been getting the lay from all over the world."

I was suddenly sick from humiliation.

"Yeah—they're Martians all right. They come down everywhere. They got a muckle of funny weepons and as near as we can get it, they've tied up every nation on earth. It was a big push for sure. They knocked down our airplanes with some kind of magnetism. Nobody's figured it out yet."

"You got all this up in these hills—"

"Seems like there's still a couple of resistance pockets. They got French Army bottled up somewhere in the Per'nees and the Yankees are making a stand with their backs to the Rockies. Outside of that, things is tough."

"Then it's hopeless!"

"Wouldn't say that, younker. In a deal like this you can't tell what might turn up. We got about three hundred men here—good men that know how to fight and we won't have to worry much up in these hills."

"Not worry! Good lord! When they get around to it, they'll come up and wipe us out."

"Don't quite think so, younker. We been finding out some things. These Martians can't get us except in one way. That's by fire, and they don't want to burn down these woods. That's something that's been noticed about them. Chunt's filly got the lay on New York and Chicago. Funny thing is these Martians don't want no destruction. They won't even break a window if they can help it. And a forest fire in the Black Hills nigh panicked them."

"Then they'll send in an army."

"Haw. What they don't know about woods fighting would fill six books. Why, Simpson's panty-boy got one with a .22. They ain't so tough when you play checkers with them on your own board."

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MY HUMILIATION was almost too great to bear.

"And don't worry about these folks sitting around like ducks, younker. I took me a little census a while back and we laid out about three hundred of their stragglers in all. Mizz Johnson even got one on her back stoop with a shotgun. Fired through a window and cut him right in two."

At that moment there came sound from the higher ground—soft voices singing. The words came drifting down on the breeze:

Onward Christian soldiers
Marching as to war
With the cross of Jesus—

"That's the women folks," Josh said. "It's a caution. Get three women together in these hills and they start a prayer meeting."

"I can't go back and face them, Josh. After making an ass of myself."

"Don't worry about that none. These folks like a good laugh as well as the next party, but they don't hold onto it long. Me—I gotta go back and salvage my gin jug. I'll see you by the grub table."

I walked up onto the high ground to let the breeze cool my face.

I LEARNED OF THE STRANGE AND GHASTLY WEAPON THE MARTIANS BROUGHT WITH THEM. Peggy had taken well to the woods. She had pitched into mountain living with an intentness of purpose that revealed her objective—the hiding of her grief—the living with it—the retention of normalcy under stark emotional pressure.

There was a pool near Josh's cabin, a rustically beautiful place where Peggy spent many hours with a fish-spear. She became skillful at the art of spearing four and five-pound bass lurking in the crystal waters.

It was early afternoon when I heard the scream—Peggy shrieking out in mortal terror from the pool. I snatched up the .22 Josh had given me and pelted up the hill through the trees. The forest formed a thick hedge around the pool and Peggy's scream came again and again as I narrowed the intervening distance. Then I burst through the hedge and stood transfixed.

Peggy was on a rock ledge above the pool. She wore the two-piece bathing suit she'd made from a calico dress given her by a mountain woman. In her hand was her fish spear—in her eyes stark terror. And coming up out of the pool—

—a clot of ghastliness almost beyond comprehension; a slimy, green two-headed beast almost formless in its bulky corpulance. It's glutinous eyes were fixed upon Peggy and there was in them a hypnotic stare that held her motionless with her spear raised. The beast came higher out of the water and its two heads split open into sharp-toothed maws seeking to pull her down from the ledge.

I RACED around the pool, brought up the .22 and fired at the closest head. Nothing happened; nothing was changed. The great green thing flowed ever upward in soundless, slithering motion. I fired again and again until the magazine of my .22 was empty. Then I hurled the gun itself. The weapon went on right into and through the thing without bothering it.

Then I knew.

"Peggy!" I screamed. "It isn't there. Close your eyes and tell yourself it isn't there!"

She must have thought me mad if she even heard me.

"It's like the fence, Peggy! It was put into your mind like some kind of germ when the Martians captured you."

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She had backed against the rock wall now and there was no escape. Her eyes met mine in frantic appeal. "It's not like the fence," she babbled. "It's real—real. I can smell its breath!"

Then she came close to cancelling out my whole argument. "If—if they only put it into my mind, how can you see it, too?"

I was on the ledge beside her now. I took her in my arms and felt her flesh quivering on the brink of madness. My mind raced. There was logic in what she said. How could I see it, too? The same hallucination at the same instant—that is, if it *was* a hallucination.

The bulging eyes and the fetid maw were close to us. The monstrosity seemed to be taking its time now that we were hopelessly trapped. I had to think—think fast. I was certain of my premise, but death still slobbered scant inches away.

A sudden idea: "Peg—tell me. What does it look like? Describe it—quick!"

One of the heads came in closer. The huge jaws snapped shut and the teeth clashed with a ringing sound.

"Quick, Peg! Describe it!"

"Its—its feathers are orange. It has black wings with all the feathers gone at the tips. A hooked beak and great claws!" Peg covered her eyes and sobbed as hysteria gripped her.

I laughed. "I see something entirely different. A huge green snake with two heads. I was right, Peg! Hallucinations. Mine is different from yours. Look. I'll prove it's only in our minds!"

I took a step forward. It was like walking against a sharp sword pressed against my heart. I had only logic to go on. The beast looked as real as the rock on which we stood. But I walked into it, just as I'd walked into the fence.

And it was gone.

Peg's eyes were open. She was staring and I could see that her monstrous bird was gone also. Her eyes rolled and she fell into a faint.

"BUT DALE, why do they do it? You really can't frighten people to death. Not very many, that is. You can terrorize them, but—"

"I don't know why or how they do it, Peg. Maybe they have the power of creating these images in order to put people off their guard. Suppose they were advancing against one of our armies. With a vanguard of conjured-up horrors, they could certainly throw their enemy off guard—put him at a disadvantage."

"Maybe the monstors can kill if a person doesn't get them out of mind. That girl died back in the enclosure."

"Yes, maybe they can kill. But you'd better rest now. And if you see another one, remember how to fight it. Deny it's existence and it vanishes".

I LEARNED OF TREACHERY: The gathering at Black Pond showed no signs of dispersing, even on the second day. Some old abandoned buildings were brought into use for shelters but, for the most part, the people lived under the sun in the daytime and under the stars at night.

There were lengthy conferences among the men as to what shape their resistance should take. Some voiced a preference for a direct attack on the various garrisons set up by the Martians in the lower country.

Josh argued against this: "Let's not go feeling our oats. We got to go in strictly for skirmishes. We ain't strong enough to face an army of them leather devils. Keep nipping at them. Cut off their scouting parties. Put the fear of God into them, and wait for something to turn up."

It sounded to me like the sensible procedure, but some were against it: "What for do we have to hide out in

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the hills? Looks downright yellow to me. I'm for going down and taking the measure of them rapscallions."

Only Hot Ear had no opinion. His sole comment was, "Damn fine gin here. Count me in."

They seemed to have forgotten my speech. There were no allusions to it and I was accepted on the reserved basis of all outlanders.

IT WAS on the morning of the third day that disaster came without warning. Just after dawn, a thin scream from one of the women and one wall of a building disappeared in searing flame. The camp flared into desperate activity as the Martians were sighted—several platoons of them swinging around one corner of the lake.

Now, all the buildings were afire from strange white flames that spewed from the muzzles of the Martian guns and seemed hot enough to melt metal. Women and children died quickly—turned into charred shapeless things.

Brought suddenly awake, I breathed a prayer of gratitude that Peggy was back in Josh's cabin helping a mountain woman have a baby.

Josh, who had been sleeping beside me, rolled over with a curse. "What in hell happened to the sentries?" he yelled. Then he was on his belly sighting along the barrel of his .22.

A .22 is a small gun. At a hundred yards it must be fired accurately to be a dangerous weapon. The Martians came in a wedge. I heard Josh's rifle crack in my ear. The lead Martian flung a hand to his right eye and pitched forward.

Other guns were working now. On my other side Hot Ear had come alive and his 30-30 roared out. A Martian doubled over his stomach and went down. "By damn," Hot Ear grunted. "Get 'em quick or we're cooked. One woods fire comin' up."

Josh's rifle was empty. He snatched mine, asking, "You still got that funny gun we took down by the pond?"

I took it from my pocket.

"Go ahead and use it on the bastards. I didn't think they'd have the guts to burn down the woods!"

I raised the gun and sighted down the barrel. Then Josh's hand was on my arm. "Never mind. Ain't no need of it. This fire's going to be bad enough as it is."

Josh was right. The Martians had made the same mistake as the British red-coats so long ago. A solid phalanx—a wall of warriors moving forward against the finest sharpshooters on earth. They had been cut down with such merciless accuracy of fire that only a few remained standing; a few bewildered terror-striken Martians who even now went lumbering away as they had come.

Hot Ear came to his feet. His gun lay discarded but in his right fist was a glittering knife—a six-inch blade. His eyes were bright. "By damn! Gonna get me some beef!"

Two or three other mountaineers followed him as he paddled off into the woods.

The dry grass around the demolished buildings was burning now—moving ahead of the wind toward the thick forest. "Get old sacks, sticks, take off your shirts," Josh yelled. "We got to beat out that fire or we're goners."

There was fear in his eyes and even as I worked like a coolie against the flames I couldn't help considering the irony of this. The Martians had come out of the sky with weapons far beyond our knowledge—in ships beyond our power to duplicate. Yet the only thing hereabouts that had struck fear into Josh's heart was an old-fashioned forest fire.

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DOWN THE hill, in grisly heaps, lay the Martians. To me, they presented a hazard. I said, "Josh, hadn't somebody better go down and check? If any of those devils are still alive they might open up on us."

Josh snorted and continued pounding the flames with an old gunny sack. "Don't worry none. Any Martian that dropped is dead. Ain't nobody in this crowd that has to take a second look after getting his bead. Keep on pounding this damn fire."

We finally got it out. With only a smoldering arc left, a bucket line from the pond killed it even to the last wisps of smoke in the charred grass.

Josh straightened and I was struck by his changed appearance. He looked old and haggard and tired. There was an icy misery in his eyes and he passed a trembling hand across his brow.

We joined the circle of men who stood silently regarding the black building sites. That was all that remained. The sites. A line of inch-high charcoal along the ground in rectangles to indicate where the buildings had been.

And inside—nothing identifiable as a charred body. Annihilated in the blinking of an eye. Destruction appalling in its swiftness.

There was a low curse from one man; taken up by others until it became an intense rumble of continuous curses. Then, from up on the hill, the women, huddled together, broke into mournful song:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me—

The cursing died. The men turned and walked slowly toward the women.

At that moment a sound cut the silence. The chilling scream of a Martian off in the woods; a Martian who was tasting six inches of Hot Ear's steel in his throat. Came another gurgling yell of agony and then all was silent again.

Josh took me by the sleeve and drew me aside. "Come on up the woods a piece. I want to talk."

"Certainly, Josh."

HE WALKED with head bowed like an old man. We went through the underbrush into a heavy thicket and Josh dropped wearily down on a boulder. I sat beside him.

"They want me to be their leader, younker. They want me to give the orders. We was going to take a vote on it today."

"We couldn't make a smarter move. I'm glad."

He shook his head. "I can't be no leader. My heart's too heavy. It's all beat out of me—all beat out."

"I don't understand, Josh."

"There's something's got to be done. I ought to do it but I ain't man enough. And I ain't man enough to get anybody else to do it—to tell them. That's why I'm asking you."

He was talking around something—trying to come to the point. I waited.

"This is war, Dale. War to the knife, and it's got to be fought like a war."

It occurred to me that it was the first time he'd called me by my name. "I think they found out today what they're up against."

"That's right. They'll come in now. They'll hunt us out. Maybe they'll even burn down the woods. I don't think so, though. I just know they'll come."

"And we'll keep on fighting."

"But this is war, and in war you kill traitors. They got to be shot down like dogs."

"I don't understand."

"Remember the first night you came? I sent Lee back for the gun that Martian was carrying. The one you wanted."

"I remember."

"After you left, I got a mite worried

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something could happen to Lee. My younker and all—I was nervous. So I struck out after him. Instead of going the safe roundabout way, he hit for the cement road and I followed, not calling him—just wondering."

"He didn't go for the gun?"

"No. He went down to the road and when one of them funny little Martian autos came along, he waved it down. He talked to them awhile and there must have been one of them that knew American 'cause he got into the car and rode away with them."

"Maybe they captured him."

Josh shook his head sadly. "No. All the outlanders in creation couldn't catch Lee less he wanted to be. He went with them of his own free will."

"I can't understand it—it seems incredible."

"Me too. I came back to the cabin, fretting over it. In the morning Lee showed up. He said the Martian's body was gone."

JOSH PUT his face into his gnarled hands. "I couldn't bring myself to question him on it, so that's where I become a traitor myself."

"Stop talking that way."

"I could have saved them—all of them—if I'd done what any soldier should do."

"You mean Lee showed the Martians how to get to Black Pond?"

"Of course he did. They'd never of made it themselves even if they'd tried. They'd be wandering around in the woods yet. Not only that, but our sentries would have warned us. Only a mountain man could have sashayed around and killed them sentries. Only a good mountain man. Only my younker, Lee."

I was stunned. I wanted to say something to comfort this suffering mountain man. I could find no words.

He raised his head. "Do you figure you owe me anything for snagging you out of that prison camp?"

"I probably owe you my life."

"Okay—I want a favor."

"Anything," I said, even then feeling sure what it would be.

"I want you to kill Lee." He raised a hand. "Wait—that ain't the word. Not kill. I want you should execute him after sentence is passed."

"Who'll pass sentence?"

"Reckon I'll have to do that."

I sat thinking for a moment. I could kill Martians with joy in my heart, but this—it meant cold-bloodedly drawing a bead on a man and putting a bullet through him. Then I again became conscious of Josh's suffering.

"I'll do it."

"Thanks, Dale."

"But where will we find him?"

"Now that the Martians got licked, I think he'll be coming back shortly." Josh got wearily to his feet. "Yes, I think he'll come striding up the draw like nothing happened."

I had a sudden thought. "Wait—maybe the Martians executed him. Possibly, with their men slaughtered, they'll think he led them into a trap."

JOSH FAVORED me with a pitying glance. "You ain't thinking very good, younker. You got the least idea Lee don't know that? You think he'd let them get their hands on him? That's why he'll come back. It's the only place he'll be safe."

Lee returned about noon. He strode into camp, was convincingly surprised at the desolation and explained he'd been scouting the woods all night for Martian stragglers. Proudly announced he'd gotten three.

Josh sighed and handed me Hot Ear's 30-30. "You better have this. Keep it 'til the Indian gets back. We're breaking camp and moving into the hills. It might get left behind."

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He took his own .22 and said, "Come on, Lee. We got to head for home. There's some womenfolk there that might need some help."

We started off into the woods. We walked in silence for a mile. Then Josh said, "Lee."

Lee turned to find Josh's rifle trained on his belly at ten feet.

"Drop your gun down, younker."

"What the hell!"

"Drop it!"

Lee opened his hand and the rifle fell to the ground.

"Get it, Dale."

I circled around and picked up the gun and brought it back to where Josh was standing.

"Sit down on the gound, Lee."

"I don't get all this!"

"You will. Sit down—quick."

Lee went down on his haunches, then slowly extended his legs. Josh regarded him in silence for a full minute. "It was the filly, wasn't it, Lee? You wanted the filly Dale brought up here and you knew I wouldn't let you take her. That's it, wasn't it."

"What in hell you talking about?"

"I followed you. You got in that car. You went down and made a deal to bring them devils up here if you could have the filly. Ain't I right?"

Lee stared dully. "You followed me?" There was unbelief in his voice. Josh chuckled dryly and without humor.

"That hits your pride, don't it? You didn't figure there was a man living could trail you and get away with it. Hits your pride."

I'D EXPECTED heated denial, but there was none. Possibly this youth knew his father too well. Maybe there had been other things between them before; things to make a denial futile. He stared at Josh through calculating eyes.

"What you going to do?"

"Them devils killed women and children—burned them down to cinders."

"What you going to do?"

"I'm sentencing you to death. You got to be killed, Lee. This is war. You got to die."

Lee's lip twisted. "You can't kill me. You can't pull the trigger."

"Maybe not. I got me an executioner. Dale's going to do it."

I trained the 30-30 on Lee. Josh said, "Get up. Stand with your back to that tree. There's got to be some dignity to this."

Lee's eyes were on my gun. For the first time, he was showing fear. But he said nothing. He got up slowly, carefully, as though he expected a blast at any moment. He backed toward the tree, half crouched. An animal at bay. The rifle was at my shoulder.

Josh closed his eyes. "Now," he whispered.

The big gun thundered. It was only twenty feet. A blind man could have killed Lee at twenty feet with a 30-30. But I was not a blind man. I missed.

Lee whirled in a half turn. The closest cover was forty feet away at the edge of the open glade. He moved like a deer.

Josh brought up the .22, his face contorted. His voice came thick, strangled: "I can't—I can't—I can't!" Then: "Run, Lee. Run for your life! Run and don't never come back!"

Josh turned his face toward mine. There was gratitude in his eyes; unspoken thanks for my poor shot.

In the underbrush—a scream. A single high scream. Then silence. The still passage of a minute before Hot Ear materialized like a shadow from the underbrush. He had just finished wiping his knife. He was dropping a wad of stained grass to the ground.

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"By damn! Nothing to say, old friend—nothing at all to say."

Josh's face was bleak with sadness but he didn't look quite so old now. It was as though he'd regained a certain dignity.

"You. . . knew?"

"Nothing to say, old friend. We got to get into the hills. Plenty hot from now on. Them devils coming back. Did you bring the gin jug?"

I LEARNED THAT IN THE DEAD EMBERS OF DEFEAT THERE OFTEN LIES THE FIRE OF VICTORY: The mountaineers reassembled higher up on Stormy Mountain, at a spot where a natural rock formation in front of a large cave afforded protection. Also, the foreground was bare of trees—an open arena in which a great many enemies could be cut down.

They all came this time, Peggy carrying the new-born babe she'd helped bring into the world in Josh's cabin. Hot Ear strode by my side. At the cave mouth he caught my arm and drew my attention downward, pointing to a faint indentation in the soil close by a boulder.

"Two hundred years old, that track," he said. "By damn—man who made that handed in his checks way back before revolution."

Josh had said little on the trip up. "It's an Indian print. This was where the Senecas got their soap. Years ago all this stone was soft. It's hardened some since."

They got all the women into the cave along with the children. The men squatted around outside talking in low tones.

"It'll be a last stand," Josh said quietly. We'll give 'em hell, but they're too many for us. The patrols have been coming in deeper and deeper. They're making it some kind of an issue that they get us."

"We been killing too many," Hot Ear said contentedly. He patted his 30-30 and grinned. "Betsy'll kill more before she's fried down to a piece of charcoal. By damn!"

It was mid-morning and beans were served out all round in cans. The men chomped their rations in silence while keeping one eye out for the scouts who would appear at the forest fringe to tell us the Martians were coming.

Off to the left, a shot was heard—another and another, while the men got to their feet, threw bean cans out into the open area and moved into positions behind the rocks.

I was between Josh and Hot Ear. The iron-faced Tarp was on the far side of his father rolling a wad of tobacco around in his mouth and checking the hammer of his rifle.

It occurred to me, sharply, as I watched these mountain men, that this was only a small skirmish in the vast invasion of the Martians; an inconsequential detail of the war which would probably not even go into the history books. Yet here was fiber, courage—American character at its finest. Men who would die but never yield. I felt a sudden warmth, a pride at being with them. They weren't my kind, but I hoped I could prove worthy of being their kind.

THREE FIGURES broke from the underbrush and came running across the clearing. They leaped behind the rocks and found places in the line. Only one of them spoke. Three laconic words: "Maybe five minutes."

Nobody asked any questions.

The Martians broke from cover about three and a half minutes later. Hot Ear got in the first shot. He said, "By damn!" and sent a Martian pitching forward on his face.

The Martian fire guns would not reach across the open arena. They fell

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about fifty yards short. That gave the entrapped sharpshooters a distance of about twenty yards in which to be effective. The twenty yards represented the range of their own weapons over those of the invaders.

Rifles began to crack. The Martians began to fall. But it was impossible to kill them all now. They were a gray horde; a vast bank of obscenity moving forward like ocean waves. We could only cut down the forward wave and watch the next and the next move over it.

The deadly fire did check the head-on drive. The advance guard was not too anxious to step into the withering fire, but they were pushed on by those in the rear.

Josh was cutting down his men carefully, methodically, with never a miss. One bullet—one Martian. Two bullets—two Martians—and so on. Multiplying Josh by the rest of our force made a lot of dead gray men, but there were always more. They came within fire-gun range and the first hot ray melted the rock ten feet ahead of us.

Yet, there was no panic in our line. Still the even methodical firing from end to end.

But something happened to the Martians; something sudden and unexplainable. It was as though they were animals suddenly assailed by a terrorizing scent. They began milling in panic.

Then we saw their rearward ranks going down; going down silently for no apparent reason; falling in their tracks to trap those in front with a growing heap of dead bodies.

The Martians began screaming—babbling in their alien language. They became two retreating streams now, pouring left and right. But it was to no avail. At both ends of the open arena they slammed into an invisible wall and crumpled down in death.

We had stopped firing; we stared in consternation and we saw them all die as though an invisible magnetic field had enveloped them and pushed the life from their bodies.

WHILE a few were still milling about like crazed cattle, a group of beings broke cover across the arena and came forward over the bodies of the dead Martians. They were beings such as I had never seen before.

Rather short, but they walked smartly and with brisk dignity; half a dozen warriors clad in bright red and green uniforms.

"Hold your fire," Josh breathed. It seemed only a whisper, yet it was heard clear up and down the line.

At that moment a smile appeared on the swarthy face of the leader of the strange men. He held up his hand in a peace gesture and came nimbly forward over the sprawled bodies—up to the rock barricade where he stopped—still smiling.

"Who is in charge here, please?"

He spoke meticulously, making it obvious that he was unsure of the language and didn't want to make any mistakes. I pushed Josh to his feet. The green and red warrior came forward and held out his hand. Josh took it, shook it, dropped it.

"Allow me to introduce myself and apologize. INTRODUCTION: I am Zav Dorn Ledet of the Planetary Venusian Armies. APOLOGY: We are very sorry to have had to land on your planet without proper announcements and ceremonies but we could not allow the Martian—scum I think your word is—to destroy you."

No one said anything. No one could think of anything to say. Zav Dorn Ledet went on: "They are poor fighters, very timid in defeat. We were surprised that they invaded you be-

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cause we had told them not to. It was in our over-all plan to wait fifty more years until you were a trifle further advanced and then contact you with the idea of opening mutual relationships."

He smiled a sunny smile. "We will be very careful about destruction on your planet while removing this vermin and will enter into negotiations to pay any damages incurred. Incidentally, we have made five landings and the situation is controlled, very controlled.

He hesitated. "Doesn't anyone wish to say anything? I repeat, our feelings are of the friendliest. We do not wish to offend you. Later if you do not wish to enter into mutually beneficial relationships, we will return as we came. Doesn't someone wish to say something? I understand your language most readily."

Hot Ear pulled a stick of tobacco from his pocket. "By damn!" he said. "We sure do! Have a chaw!"

THE RECENT international congress on interplanetary flight held in London this year was enough to gladden the heart of any lover of science fiction and any believer in the ultimate possibility of space flight. Here, experts from every country (except the Soviet Union) met and discussed the technological problems confronting Man in his quest to get off the Earth and, oddly enough, it appears that the greatest drawback to advanced rocket flight is not technological matters, but that old bugaboo—money!

Wernher von Braun, former head of Peenemuende, where the V-2 was developed during the war, and now director of a United States rocket research station, was about the only outstanding individual who did not attend the convention. But the American representative read a paper of his in which, in exact detail, von Braun calls for a rocket flight to Mars! In some respects this paper was the highlight of the convention for, down to the last trivial item, it discusses the means and methods and plans of a supposed flight to Mars of some seventy technicians—a rocket venture on the grand scale!

Von Braun envisions first the construction and installation of an Earth satellite rocket, for use as a base for the Martian flight. Then he postulates a similar base placed around Mars after a two-hundred-and-sixty-day flight. He visualizes a fleet of shuttle rockets' supplying this satellite and then the landing of an expedition on Mars from the satellite. The plan is huge and grandiose in conception and, as impressive as it is, we can't help feeling that the cause of rocketry would have been better served had von Braun stuck to the simpler and more immediately conceivable idea of getting an Earth satellite built, or taking the basic journey to the Moon.

Nevertheless, all these matters were considered at the conference, and hopes ran high. An international organization was formed to coordinate space-flight research. Its president is Dr. Eugen Saenger, famous as one of the early authorities on rockets, and now known for his work with wartime German rocket planes.

The convention and its success suggested that something is definitely in the wind. This affair, along with the numerous public announcements in rocketry and the publication of numerous papers and pamphlets, leads one to believe that there is a stirring even in official circles, an awakening which can only lead to rocket flights—interplanetary—in the not-too-remote future!

When rocket authorities and enthusiasts were few in number, it seeemed as though the day of the Lunar rocket were far off, indeed, but now, when prominent, technologically responsible men are advocating space flight, there is no question that something will be done about it. Noticeably, von Braun, even in his most enthusiastic moments, has the habit of calling the attention of the government to the fact that whoever first builds the artificial satellite around the Earth literally "controls" the world, in the sense that from it an atomic bomb can be planted everywhere. He does not do this for the purpose of war-mongering, but rather to show that democracy must act on this matter if it wants to survive. You may be sure that the Reds have given the matter a lot of thought—and let's hope that *thought* is all they've given to it!

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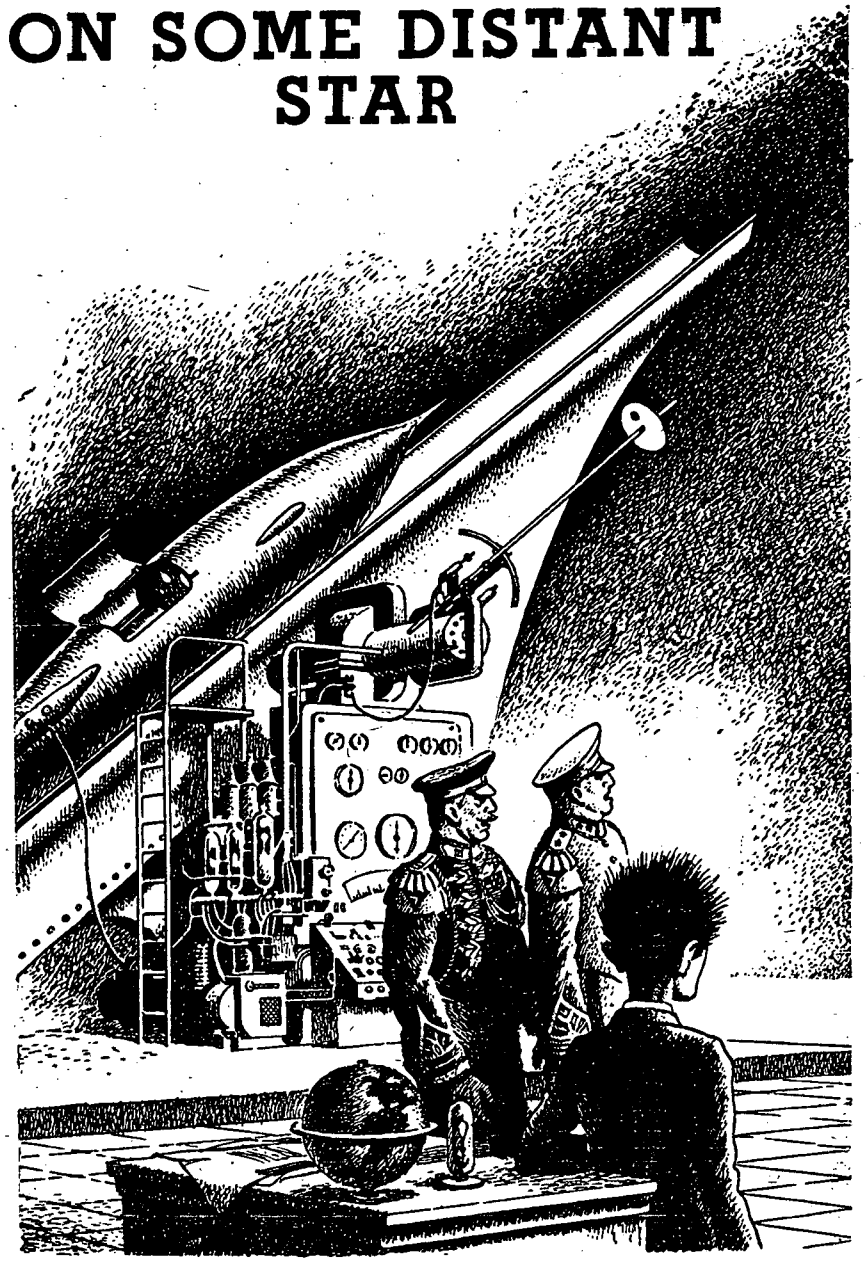
ON SOME DISTANT STAR



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By Charles Creighton

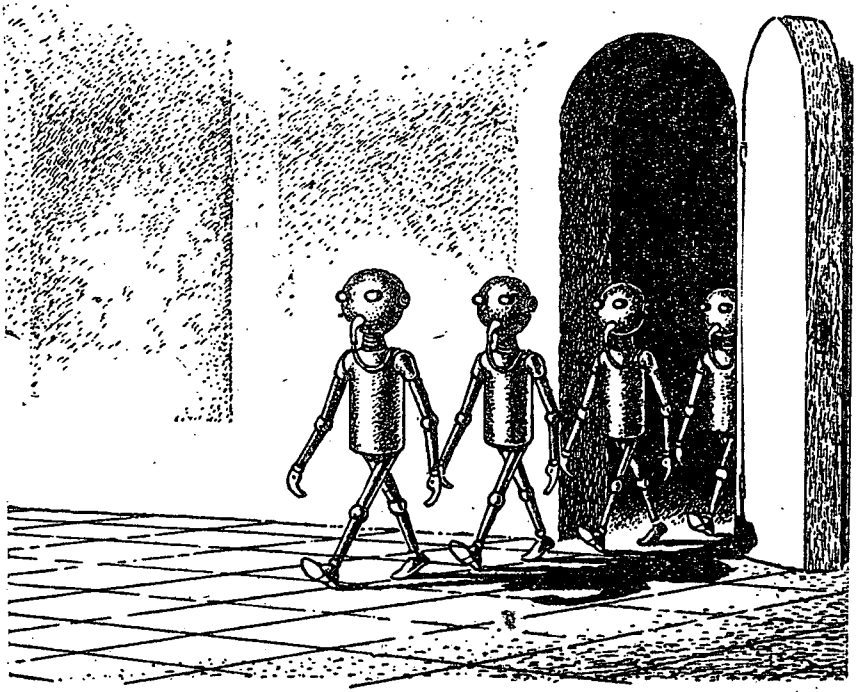
At Randy's fingertips lay the power to save humanity. It was up to him to decide if doing so was worth while . . .

"THE PRESIDENT-Dictator himself is coming," Randy Hoke whispered.

"Shh," I told him. "You can get shot for saying that."

"No talking in ranks," General Mast snapped. "President-General Holbrenner will be here in a minute and I want you people to look as if you knew the fundamentals of military discipline at least."

We knew the fundamentals, of course, the little things like saluting and clicking your heels and coming to attention. We practiced them, when ordered to do so. After General Mast snarled at us, the buzz in the ranks died down for a minute or two. Then it picked up again. "What's Holbrenner doing here at Project ABC?" I



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whispered to Randy.

"He wants the honor of pushing the button that makes things go boom," he answered. "Didn't you know—this is the last D-day?"

I shrugged. I could remember at least five D-days. "On this day we launch the attack that brings the enemy to his knees and ends the war!" The first couple of times you hear those words rolling sonorously from a loud speaker, you can believe them, you get a kick out of them. That is what you want, that is what you want more than anything else on earth. But after the fourth or fifth D-day, you only shrug when a new one comes along.

Hope too long deferred in realization tends to turn into a shrug.

"I know we've been worked to death for the last couple of years but I never knew exactly why. Say, has this got anything to do with your private project?"

"Could be," Randy answered and was silent. Even he had enough discretion to keep quiet about the hush-hush job he was doing. Only a few technicians held constantly under guard knew the nature of that project. None of the rest of us knew. We were busy building rockets and atomic warheads and microwave radio projectors and receivers, all of which were obviously part of Randy's project. But the heart, the core of it, only Randy and his technicians knew.

You don't know Randy, do you? Well, he wasn't much to look at. But he was it, just the same. When they passed out brains, Randy got two dipperfuls. When they passed out tolerance and understanding and compassion and understanding and warm human sympathy, he was on hand again with his dipper, getting more than his fair share. But when they passed out physical equipment, Randy was asleep in the corner. He had a warped misshapen body, he wasn't five feet tall, his head was too big and his arms were too long, and his hair stood straight on end. No amount of hair oil ever made it lie down. A rumor going around said his parents had worked in an uranium separation plant but they tell that story about everybody who doesn't fit the herd pattern.

Randy Hoke was one reason the Americas had lasted as long as they had. Not that he had ever produced a super weapon to date—he hadn't. But he had dug up the basic discoveries that served as foundations upon which super weapons could be built. The freeze-weapon that had turned mile-square chunks of ocean water to ice had been his brain child. What you could do in the way of stopping shipping by freezing the waters of a sea port was something of a marvel.

That freeze weapon had been blurbed as the end of war. Only, somehow, it hadn't been. Sure, we could stop shipping out of Brest and Liverpool and other ports, for the length of time the ice took to thaw, but we couldn't land men at these ports, to hold them. Wars end when your enemy is dead or when you have a knife at his throat. And not before.

BUT THAT is neither here nor there and I, Bill Jones, radio technician top grade, do not wish to write of it. I wish to write of the coming of President-General Holbrenner to the Top Top Top Top Secret Project ABC Laboratories, located in what had once been an important copper mine in the Rocky Mountains of western Montana. Every one of those *Tops* belongs where it is. Each is a reflection of the operation of the military mind and its passion for secrecy.

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They tell me that in the old days military information was graded on three levels, restricted, confidential, and secret. The company cook, of course, soon knew everything in the restricted file, the mess officer was thoroughly familiar with the confidential drawer, whereas the secret file was known only to the commanding officer, the sergeant in charge, and the sergeant's wife. The motor pool got it from her, of course, and through the motor pool—

In order to correct this situation, the military mind invented Top Secret, after which the only possible solution was to add more tops, just as the only solution for general's itch is more stars. But no matter how many Tops were added, the sergeant's wife and the motor pool eventually had the information.

The European Federation had its motor pools too, which was probably the source of our knowledge of their Big Bertha, the big boom-boom that they were preparing for us. They could build D-day weapons too. And had, the grapevine said. I did not doubt that within one hour after the President-General arrived at Project ABC, the European high command would know where he was and what he was doing. Microwave radio in thumb nail size transmitters sending an impulse that bounces back to earth on the other side of the globe became commonplace long ago. Like D-days, microwave radio and motor pools work both ways across the pond.

The honor guard which General Mast had dug up and which lined both sides of the tunnel at the mine entrance, was a little ragged in its formation; some swayed a little as they stood at ease, some didn't have their shoes shined, and there was a couple of bayonets that had rust on them. But what can you expect after a war has gone on for eighteen years? I know, back in 1950 the prophets thought the next war would not last longer than eighteen minutes, the length of time it took to atom bomb your enemy. So much for the prophets. I remember when the last elected president took office seven years ago in the new capital in Colorado, the third new capital the Federation had had. The old capital, Washington, went up in '83, the second year of the war. Holbrenner was not an elected president; he had seized power and was actually a dictator, though you could get shot for saying that.

The big steel door at the entrance swung open.

"Attenshun!" A sergeant yelled, at the top of his lungs. The honor guard stiffened, the scientists assembled in ranks came to attention. The President-General and one aide came marching in.

HOLBRENNER was a big man with a florid face and who-the-hell-are-you eyes. In the special uniform he had created for the commander-in-chief, he literally pawed the earth as he came into this mine.

Behind him came one man who looked like a smooth-faced college kid, except for the gun at his hip. Atwell the Butcher, they called this aide. A lot of people shuddered at just the thought of his smooth face. Atwell didn't look dangerous; he looked like a pink-faced college boy thinking up some new way to get a cow into the bell tower on Hallowe'en. But the motor pool said the butcher part of his name was well earned.

Acknowledging General Mast's salute, Holbrenner came straight to Randy Hoke. His eyes glowed with eagerness. "Ah, Professor, I understand you have something to show me?"

"Something, yes," Randy answered.

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"Everything is ready for your inspection, sir," General Mast said.

"You have this control device which we have discussed?"

"We have it, sir," General Mast answered.

The control device was new to me. Apparently it was the gadget Randy had been working on in secret. Wondering what it was, I followed Holbrenner into the damp guts of this ancient mine. Our first stop was the control section. The push button was located here but Holbrenner was not ready to use it, yet.

In the control section we had a large special map which showed the whole world, including every important city in the European Federation, Paris, Berlin, Moscow, and a lot of smaller places that no one ever heard about but which some motor pool said were key points in the enemy's set-up. Manufacturing centers were indicated, experimental laboratories, fission plants. We had each marked with a red glow lamp as a danger spot. Beside each red bulb was a green light, waiting to be turned on.

All the red lights were burning now. After Holbrenner pushed his button, the red lights were supposed to go out and the green lights to come on.

With General Mast fussing around him and trying to answer each question before it was asked, Holbrenner inspected the control section.

"Now the rockets," he said at last.

They were ready too. The first one was already on the firing ramp, a long pointed tube of metal with a rocket blast and control vanes in the rear and an atomic warhead in the nose. We had twenty-eight others just like it, all in position to move on to the firing ramp at two minute intervals, the whole operation of firing all twenty-eight to be completed in just four minutes under one hour.

Everything about the rockets was ready except the pilots. We had none. I had wondered who was going to guide these sky monsters but nobody had volunteered any information and I had had better sense than to ask. Asking questions around this place could get you a hole in the head mighty fast.

"They look like miniature space ships," Holbrenner said.

"Actually we took a developed space-ship design, a model that we were able to borrow from the old space ship design project, and modified it to meet our purpose here," General Mast explained.

"Will these things work, Hoke?" Holbrenner asked. He was twitchy and nervous. To him, this was getting close to his life's big moment.

Randy Hoke was calm in contrast. "We shot one at the moon, aiming at the crater of Copernicus, and hit the target."

"What about the twenty-eight vital points in Europe and Asia, will these rockets hit those targets?"

"They can't miss, sir," General Mast said hastily. "Professor Hoke has solved that problem for us."

IT HAD BEEN quite a problem too. Building a rocket that would travel 10,000 miles had not been difficult. They could have built *that* rocket in 1950. The problem had been—control. You could sit in a copper mine in Montana and aim a rocket at Point X in the Ural Mountains and you might hit Point X. But the chances were you would hit the steppes or the Black Sea or your friends in Vienna. They had tried pre-aiming, they had tried radar in the nose of the rocket flashing back data to human operators who in turn would control the flight of the rocket. Not much luck. A rocket traveling thousands of miles an hour is simply moving too fast for human reactions. The operator needs

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seconds to make up his mind and seconds are too long. They had also tried elaborate electronic controls similar to the computors that had been developed to aim and fire anti-aircraft batteries automatically but the factors that had to go into the computation had been too complex to permit an adequate solution of the problem.

Long-range rocketry remained about where it had always been, artillery that you could use to hit a continent or a country. It killed people, lots of people, but it didn't win wars.

However if a way could be found to pin-point these rockets to their target...

As I understood it, Randy had found a way.

"Show me the controls," Holbrenner said.

"Yes, sir," General Mast answered. He had saved this for the last because it was best. Because he had a lot of ham in him, he had arranged to dramatize it for the benefit of the President-General.

"Here they are, sir," Mast said. He made a sign to a lieutenant who had been standing at attention beside a closed door. The lieutenant saluted and opened the door.

A gasp went up over that whole vast room as the door opened. They came marching out in file, one by one, about three feet tall. Light gleamed back from the dull metal of their bodies, their arms swung in rhythm like well trained troops marching, the twin photoelectric cells that were their eyes glowed with a dull radiance.

They looked like an army of black dwarfs appearing on the scene.

Holbrenner took a step backward. Fright appeared on his face.

"Robots!" he gasped.

The robot idea, the electro-chemical computing brain that made them possible, was not new. Even the idea of robot armies had been advanced. But it had failed in every case.

These robots were new. Nothing like them had ever been put together before. This was what a man like Randy Hoke could do to an old idea.

At the sight of the robots, Atwell pulled the gun at his hip. He fired a single shot. The bullet struck the first robot in the line, a glancing blow on one side of the chest. The robot swayed a little at the impact, balanced itself, and kept on coming.

It came to a halt in front of Holbrenner, saluted as smartly as any palace guardsman, left faced, and marched away.

"Hold it," Holbrenner shouted at Atwell.

The Butcher didn't shoot again. Near the door, the lieutenant there caught his stomach and went slowly to the floor. Atwell's shot, glancing from the robot, had found a target.

As the lieutenant went down, Atwell lifted his head and looked once, then forgot the matter. A dead man wasn't new enough in his life to justify a second look. A private slipped from the rear rank of the honor guard and carried the wounded officer away. We learned later that the lieutenant died.

"Wonderful, wonderful, wonderful," Holbrenner was saying.

THE ROBOTS, in perfect order, were clicking their heels in front of him, saluting, executing a left face and moving on to take their place in the file that was standing at attention near the rockets, awaiting orders there.

"How do you like them, sir?" General Mast inquired.

"They are magnificent!" Holbrenner answered.

Mast glowed. The expression on his face said he could already feel another star sprouting on his shoulders. Poor devil, he had only two.

"Will these robots guide the rockets to their targets?"

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"Perfectly, sir," Mast answered. Maybe he would get *two* more stars!

"Professor Hoke, my congratulations," Holbrenner said.

"Thank you," Randy answered.

"Are the robot pilots ready to start now?" Holbrenner continued. "I might as well tell you, this is important. Secret reports from inside Europe indicate that somehow or other the Federation has ferreted out the nature of the research being carried on here. They are building the largest atom bomb ever assembled and have devised a new homing device, their purpose being to wipe out this whole project. We must go into action before they do."

The only sound in the vast room then was the click of robot heels.

General Mast saluted. "We are ready, sir," he said.

"These robots cannot disobey their orders, they cannot fail to pilot the rockets to their destination?"

"No, sir," General Mast said.

We stayed long enough to watch the first robot pilot take its place inside the rocket already on the firing ramp. It looked like a small black child scrambling into that dark interior. But it was a child who would not need air or water, it could go far beyond the atmosphere. If Randy Hoke said he could guide a rocket, I was willing to believe it.

Robot Number 1, the leader of a non-human Kamikaze squad.

After the rocket port had been shut, we went quickly to the control room. By remote control, the rockets would be fired from here.

On the big map the twenty-eight red lights gleamed.

Holbrenner pushed the button.

The answering roar of the rocket taking off thudded through the whole mountain. Seconds later the loudspeaker at the radio desk said.

"Robot Number 1 reporting. The take-off was successful."

Randy hadn't told us these things could talk. The words came as a shock. Even Holbrenner looked surprised.

"Carry on," Randy said. He had taken up his position handling the microphone at the radio desk.

The roar of the second rocket shook the mountain. Down in the firing chamber, I could imagine sweating technicians wheeling those huge rockets into position. They had big cranes for the job. I could also imagine the robot taking its place at the special controls.

Robot Two reported by radio. And got its orders from Randy Hoke. "Carry on as ordered."

When the last rocket had thudded into the sky, every man in the big control chamber glued his eyes on the map where the red lights were shining. The plan, as explained by General Mast, was for all rockets to arrive simultaneously on their targets. Since the first rocket had left an hour before the last one, and since their targets were hundreds of miles apart, the plan was for the rockets, under the guidance of their robot pilots, to assemble in space. Then each would be aimed at its target by its pilot. Microwave radio carried in each rocket would turn off the red lights on the map, turn on the green ones.

We waited for word to come from the robots. It came.

"Robot One reporting. We are assembled in space as planned."

"Carry on as ordered," Randy Hoke said.

THERE WAS silence in the big room. Holbrenner looked like a kid with a new toy. "We'll smash every vital point at the same instant!" he exulted. "We'll blow them out of the ground wherever they are. The Federation will never recover from

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this blow. General Mast, my congratulations on your planning."

Holbrenner was exulting. Atwell looked both pleased and sad—pleased at the thought of all the destruction on schedule to take place in a few minutes, sad as if now, with the Federation doomed, a job he had loved might be near its end. General Mast's face said he could already feel four more stars on his shoulders.

Five minutes passed. Holbrenner showed signs of becoming uneasy. "Surely it is time for the explosions to begin," he said.

"Just a little longer," Randy Hoke answered.

Two minutes passed. The speaker woke to life.

"Robot Number One reporting again. A matter of importance. We have just observed a very large rocket fired from Europe. We estimate the destination to be somewhere in your vicinity."

Holbrenner frowned. What was this? Nobody spoke. Randy's face started to get white. "Carry on," he said.

"But—" the voice came from the speaker.

"Carry on as ordered," Randy Hoke said, a growl in his voice.

"Hey, what if that rocket is the Big Bertha the Federation has been getting ready to shoot at us?" Atwell shouted.

The same idea had formed in my mind but I had dismissed it. Somebody was always shooting off an experimental rocket or so.

"Impossible," Randy said.

At the words Atwell spoke, Holbrenner's face had lost some of its ruddy color. Probably he had inside information on the nature and the destination of the Big Bertha the Federation was preparing.

"Are you sure that rocket isn't—?"

"Of course I'm sure," Randy answered. "The robots have orders to report back on anything strange or unusual. To them, any other rocket is strange and unusual. They are not capable of forming proper evaluations in a matter such as this. They will report anything—"

He was making it smooth. He convinced me. Holbrenner looked convinced too.

The speaker awoke again. "We have verified the computation. This rocket from Europe is under definite control from its base. It will certainly land in your immediate vicinity—"

"Shut up," Randy said.

"But—" A pleading note crept into the mechanical voice.

"Are you on course and proceeding as ordered?" Randy spoke.

"Yes. But—"

"Then continue on it!" Randy ordered. He turned to the startled Holbrenner. "Everything is going as planned. If you will notice the board, in just a few minutes the lights will begin to go out." He nodded toward the big map.

"The board, the map, oh, yes, the map, of course."

The President-General turned his attention to the map.

"In just a few more minutes," Randy said.

"What course?" Atwell spoke.

RANDY DID not seem to hear him. "In just a few more minutes—" He sounded like a man who was asking for just a few more minutes of life, a man whose mind has been made up but who has faltered just a little in the time of crisis.

Atwell drew his gun. "What course?" he shouted.

For the first time, Randy seemed to become aware of him. "Do you doubt me?" he said.

"You're damned right I doubt you. This thing smells like a double-cross

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to me. What course are those robots following?"

Randy flinched but did not falter again. "I'll have the robots themselves tell you if you doubt me." He picked up the mike, snapped the switch.

The speaker started instantly. "This is most important. You shut us off. We have been trying to reach you—"

"Repeat your general orders," Randy Hoke said.

"W—what?" the mechanical voice stuttered.

"Repeat your general orders," Randy answered. "Word for word, repeat the orders that have been built into you and which you cannot disobey."

"Very well." A resigned note seemed to creep into the robot voice. "These are our orders: To set a course for the nearest star and to examine it, for planets. If we find planets, we are to land on one of them, and there set up a civilization that will do what men have always wanted to do but have never succeeded in achieving. A civilization without war, without hunger, without disease—"

"I knew it!" Atwell screamed. "This is treason. Those rockets are not aimed at the Federation strong points; they are leaving earth!" He would have Randy Hoke shot then, but Holbrenner grabbed his arm.

"Hold it, Atwell."

Over their voices the robot words went on. "If the nearest stellar body does not have suitable planets, then on some distant star, we will find what we are seeking. There we will build—"

"Is this true, Professor Hoke?" Holbrenner shrilled, drowning out the words from the speaker.

Randy Hoke stood very straight and very proud. Even that misshapen body seemed to grow in stature now. "It seems I can't keep it from you any longer. What you have just heard is the truth." There was pride in his voice and in his flashing eyes.

"I'll fix that," Holbrenner shouted. He hadn't become what he was without being able to think fast in an emergency. From Randy's hands he snatched the microphone. "This is the President-Dictator speaking," he shouted. In his stress, he forgot to say President-General, but spoke the truth instead. "I am your supreme commander. Your orders are cancelled. You will proceed immediately at full blast to the twenty-eight targets that have been selected—"

"Whose orders?" the speaker said.

"By order of your supreme commander!" Holbrenner shouted.

"Oh," the robot answered, in a tone of voice that was a shrug. "We take orders only from our master. And these are our orders: that on some far star we will build what men always wanted to build on earth, a civilization where no man need kill his brother, and there we will await man's coming—"

Holbrenner looked straight at Randy Hoke. "You are the only person they will obey?" he said.

"I am the only one," Randy said. "I made them that way. But—"

"Then order them back on their targets!" Holbrenner said. He motioned to Atwell, who brought up the gun.

"I anticipated this moment and this threat," Randy said. "The robots will not obey even me if I try to countermand their general orders. I made them that way. And as for you, sir, you can go to hell."

PROUD AND straight he stood as he said it, one little warped misshapen man defying the President-Dictator and his killer, defying also the whole Earth and all of man's history on it.

They should have shot him then, but they didn't. For one reason. From

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the speaker the robot voice came again. "Master, one of us *must* disobey, in one small matter—"

"You carry out your orders!" Randy Hoke screamed.

"Yes, master. On some far star—But *one* of us..."

One of them must have disobeyed in one small particular. One must have deliberately gone off course. We had the report minutes later. "—Tremendous atomic explosion well beyond the atmosphere of earth—"

It was the Big Bertha of the Federation going boom-boom. Out in space.

One small robot must have turned back, must have disobeyed, must have accepted a collision course with that Big Bertha, must have destroyed that huge atom bomb, out there in space, by ramming it.

I wonder how the robots decided which one would ram that bomb and I wonder how the robot that was selected felt as it set its sights on that Big Bertha zooming upward through the heavens?

I wonder if a robot can feel proud before it dies?

From far space, the voice of the robot leader came back over the speaker, a whisper of sound growing weaker each minute.

"We will await your coming, master."

WELL, I guess perhaps in some future century they will come back. But if they come back tomorrow, they will not find Randy Hoke.

The personal body-guards of the President-General are hanging Randy Hoke in the morning.

For treason. They're hanging General Mast, and the rest of us, too, for the same reason. I feel a little sorry for the general. He won't get his stars. Atwell thinks we are a nest of traitors here at Project ABC. And perhaps we are.

I do not care what men like Atwell think. I like to imagine, now in these last moments as I write these words, twenty-seven robots in tweny-seven rockets winging outward into space, robots that will some day build somewhere in this universe the best of which the human race has dreamed.

They are taking with them the only thing worth while about us, our dreams of a better world and of a better day than the ones we know, taking them to completion somewhere.

What we could not build here, they can build—there.

The morning light is in the corridor. I hear the feet of the marching guards.

Randy Hoke grins at me and we arise and go.

A man, at least, can feel proud....

THE END

SALT VERSUS SHOCK

By WALT CRAIN

ONE OF THE major headaches of the commission concerned with defense against atomic bombings, is how and where to obtain the enormous amounts of medical supplies which will be undoubtedly necessary. Experts have estimated that tremendous quantities of blood plasma and whole blood will be required to treat the hundreds of thousands of shock and burn casualties that any atomic bombing is inevitably bound to produce.

Some authorities have estimated that a single bomb would cause enough casualties to require a million quarts of blood plasma! Obviously it will be impracticable to obtain this much material much less store it and make it available. As a result medical authorities are studying the shock problem in great detail.

They have come up with a partial solution. Ordinary salt water, mixed with some sodium bicarbonate will do the trick. One level teaspoon of table salt along with a half teaspoonful of sodium bicarbonate, mixed in a quart of water, will do wonders toward alleviating the blood disturbing effects of burn and shock. This solution, so easily prepared will be the major liquid intake of any victims of atomic bombing.

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Strange Blood

By Paul W. Fairman

Diamonds, furs, Paris gowns: Donald gave them to his mother from out of thin air. Then one day Fate presented the bill . . .

THE FIRST shattering incident occurred when Donald was five years old. There was nothing strange about the setting. A lazy summer afternoon—Richard Laurel busy in his study above the screened porch where Greta was giving tea to Madge Benton, the most beautiful little gossip any college town ever had.

Madge Benton, armed with the financial resources of John Benton's real estate business, could dress as well as her taste dictated, and she had excellent taste. On this afternoon, she wore a stunning, gold-flecked sport frock that seemed even to attract the honey bees crawling up and down the screen on the outside.

But such a chatterbox, Madge. "He's the strangest man, really, my dear. He has the East Indian look, of course, but I can't help thinking that turban is an affectation."

Greta's hand trembled as she refilled Madge's cup. Also, her teeth caught at her lower lip; but Madge, full of her own words, did not notice this—nor the pain in Greta's eyes.

Madge's prattle went on: "And why does he continue to hang around Ludington College all these years? Think of it, darling—six years taking this course and that course. Why doesn't he go about his business—back to India or wherever it is he came from?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Greta replied weakly.

"Well, I'll tell you why. He still hopes to be accepted. He wants to be one of us, Greta, so he hangs on and walks the campus and ogles the girls with those black eyes of his. Honestly, Gret, my flesh crawls whenever he passes me. That simpering smile! And those eyes practically undress

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one."

Greta made a quick motion. Madge caught it. She turned swiftly.

"Oh, hello, Donald."

The boy was five and it occurred to Madge Benton that she had never seen him smile. An odd child, really. But perfectly behaved. You couldn't get around that.

Donald Laurel came forward from the doorway where he had been standing. He walked to his mother's chair. He put an arm over her shoulders and said, "I love you very much, Greta."

Madge Benton said, "Now isn't that sweet! There aren't very many little boys who tell their mothers that without being asked."

But there was something strange about the child—very strange. That large-eyed solemnity. Madge's smile slipped away but she got it back and said, "Do you like my dress, Donald?"

His eyes had hardly been off the smart sport creation since he'd entered the room. "Yes," he said quietly. "I like lovely things. Your dress is pretty—pretty."

He stepped across and laid a gentle hand on Madge's upper arm, stroked it as though delighting in the soft touch of the fabric.

Greta stirred uneasily. "Hadn't you better go and play now, Donald? Take a cookie and run along."

Madge Benton sprang to her feet. "Gret," she bubbled. "Don't send the boy away. I've got to run, really. We're playing bridge tonight and I have to get my hair done."

She patted Donald's head. "Now you be a good boy, Donald, and I'll bring you something pretty when I come again."

"That would be very nice."

Greta was on her feet, but Madge waved her back. "Oh, you don't have to show me to the door. I'm not company."

WITH THAT she was gone in a flounce of golden skirts. Madge stood perfectly still until she heard the front gate click. Then she dropped back into her chair. She was trembling slightly and her thoughts were thick and heavy with the renewal of the six-year-old question she'd always hurled against the bulwark she had built up in her mind.

Had it been only a dream or had it been reality?

Donald's voice broke in: "Will you sit here for a few minutes, Greta? Sit here and not go away? I have something for you."

"Why, of course, darling. You run and get it."

With complete solemnity and without haste, Donald left the porch. At the door he turned to look again at Greta. "I love you very much," he said.

"I love you too, darling."

Greta leaned back in her chair thinking again of Madge's chatter. Why had it all been brought back? Why did Madge have to mention him? After all the months and years of getting the thing out of her mind, and then—

There had been another summer morning, six years before, just after dawn in the back bedroom off the garden where Richard had brought her on their wedding night. Three months had passed and it was now a Sunday morning with Richard gone off for some early fishing.

Greta lying there in bed, eyes closed, luxurious and warm in a half doze. The nicest part of living—that half-conscious world in which one lingers just before complete wakefulness.

The hand over her mouth—a hand

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out of nowhere! The hot breath. The turning. The violence!

The blessed unconsciousness.

The waking panic with the room empty, but the evidence, sheets twisted and pulled as in stark reality—

—or as in a nightmare!

The moaning and the pain. What did one do? Run screaming? —in through an open window—driven by lust—away like a lean satisfied cat—*what did one do?*

Cruel interrogation? "Mrs. Laurel —we don't wish to embarrass you, but we must know—the extent—of the damage."

Examination! Hands not belonging to Richard.

The awful public spotlight? The juicy bit? *He came in the window while she was sleeping. The poor dear. We mustn't let on when we meet her.*

Richard's stricken face!

No. No. No. What does one do?

A nightmare. Only a nightmare. Of course. A bad dream brought on by the stark new things of marriage. That was all. So simple. She'd seen him in the street wearing that turban. A mental image. A dream.

But keep it that way—keep it that way. A dream.

Through the weeks, months, years. A dream. But now, far enough away to ask and really wonder. A dream? A nightmare?

Donald was back. Snapping Greta erect. Bringing her into the present.

He was carrying a dress. A golden sport creation to excite the honey bees. He carried it reverently over his arm. He held it forth, almost smiling, not quite.

Greta stared. Sudden wild thoughts came to her mind. Panicky—tragicomic. Madge fleeing down the street in her underthings—Madge crouching behind a bush without her dress.

"Donald! What in heaven's name!"

"I want you to have it, Greta. It's very pretty and I love you."

"But, Donald! Where did you get it? How?"

A blankness came into his face. "Why—why, I made it. It's lovely. I wanted you to have it, so I made it."

Greta snatched the dress—held it out by the shoulders. Not Madge's dress. Madge, a petite five-foot-three. Not her dress. A larger one—perfect for Greta's large-boned five-seven. Greta sank weakly into a chair.

"Donald. This is serious. Tell me. *Where did you get this dress?"*

He laid a gentle hand on her head. "Dear Greta—I'm sorry. I've upset you. I didn't mean to. I just want you to have pretty things."

"Tell me where you got it!"

The child pondered. "I thought—and it was on the table."

"Then someone brought it?"

"No. It wasn't there before. I made it."

"Great God in heaven!"

"I've upset you."

"No, darling, no. Go and play now —please."

THERE wouldn't be a copy in the window, of course. Madge didn't buy dresses you found in windows or on the backs of other women. But this was the place. Greta entered the lush interior of Searchman's and found words hard come by when the salesgirl approached her.

"My—my little boy. I thought he might have come in here?"

"You are looking for a child, madame?"

"Yes. My little boy."

"No children have been here."

"Within the last hour?"

"No, madame."

Greta went around back and up the alley. She skirted two delivery trucks and found the rear entrance of Search-

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man's. It was a steel door flush with the bricks. It opened from the inside. No small boy could have gotten in. Greta returned home.

"You were downtown, Greta?"

"Yes, Donald. Was I gone long?"

There was hurt in the eyes. "You should have taken me."

"I'm sorry, darling. Next time."

"I love you. I like to be with you."

Greta sat down on the lounge and drew her son close. "Donald, look at me."

The child obeyed, turning his face to hers. Greta stared. Her reaction up to this moment had been one of reality; of fact; a reaction based on a normal, recognized world. But staring into the child's dark, fathomless eyes, she could find a new basis for reaction: a strange, unknown world. But unreal? What is a dream and what is not? Could anyone draw the line—this is the real—this the unreal?

No.

Rather—this is the known—this the unknown.

In Donald's eyes, the sturdiness of new vistas.

A strange thrill ran through Greta. "Come, darling. I'm sorry I left you. We'll go window-shopping."

"AREN'T they beautiful, Donald?"

The shoes were beautiful. Alligators in Williams' window with no price tabs in evidence. Williams' lowest price was eighteen dollars.

"Pretty—pretty." Donald pointed to a pair of white pumps. "Those too."

Greta glanced pointedly down at her own low-heeled blacks. She sighed. "Let's go home, Donald. We've window-shopped enough."

Donald looked up at her. "You like lovely things, too, don't you?"

"Yes, darling."

Donald brought his mother the white pumps ten minutes after they got home. She was in the kitchen working with supper. He laid the shoes on the table before her. "I want you to have them because I love you so much,"

Greta fell to her knees and took the boy in her arms. He did not respond to her emotion, but he seemed pleased. He stroked her hair and she felt herself in the presence of age—kindly age bathed in gentle spirit. But, somehow, he was of her no longer. In brief hours he had gone beyond her understanding.

But there was pride.

"My son! My son!"

"AM I disturbing you, Richard?"

He looked up from the paper he was doing on ancient Aztec culture. "Of course not, my dear."

"I wanted to get one of your books. Don't you have something on India? Some religion—*yoga*, I believe they call it."

"You'll find a couple of volumes on the top shelf—there at the far end."

Greta took down the books, glanced at the titles. She could pronounce neither of them.

"Why the interest in Indian religions, my dear?" If there was other than curiosity in her husband's voice, Greta failed to notice it.

"I've been meaning to look into *yoga* for quite some time. A fascinating thing, don't you think? All about men who can walk through walls—"

"As something of casual interest—yes." Richard was speaking carefully.

Greta snapped a book shut. "What do you think of *yoga* really, Richard? Is there anything to it?"

He considered carefully before answering. "It all depends. As I said before—from casual interest—"

"It's about the mind being all-powerful, isn't it?"

"Something of the sort. I never

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went into it very deeply. I think it could be dangerous—"

"Dangerous?"

"*Yoga* is a pretty deep proposition."

Greta laughed. "But more exciting possibly than a detective story on a hot summer afternoon."

"Very probably."

Greta kissed him and left the study.

SHE READ both books through from cover to cover. Most of it she did not pretend to understand. She skipped the long words and the obtuse passages but certain quotations flamed in her mind:

The human brain cannot be approached entirely from the standpoint and attitude of the medical man. Here the spiritual searcher moves beyond realms of the flesh and finds vaster frontiers.

It cannot be denied—authoritatively, that is—that the average human uses only ten percent of his mental power.

And a more exalted passage:

The human brain is beyond conception in its power. When used to its capacity, there are no wonders it cannot perform. It is an unending spiral toward the infinite. The mind conceives a small thing, and it is within the mind's power to create or accomplish that thing. Then, from the accomplishment, comes wider conceptions, greater power to accomplish. The secret is work—discipline—complete objectivity. The reward, an ever greatening unfoldment toward the infinite.

Greta pondered deeply. The secret was work. That also was the secret of great accomplishment in anything—on the violin, for instance. But once in a while a child was born with the talent to pick up a violin and—play.

The thrill was swelling in her heart. The possibilities. She thrilled as could any wife of an obscure college professor on poor pay.

"IT'S A beautiful fur coat, isn't it, Donald? The one in the middle. Mink is one of the most expensive furs in the world."

Donald stared at the coat with all the seriousness of a judge about to pass sentence. "Pretty—pretty," he murmured. "Do you really think mink is the loveliest fur there is?"

"Yes, darling. And it's very warm on cold winter days."

They arrived home at about three o'clock that day and Donald became occupied with some sand models he was constructing in the back yard. It wasn't until after supper, with Richard back in his study, that Greta again spoke of the coat.

"Are you going to—make me one, Donald?"

The child stared soberly at the dish he was wiping. "I can't make up my mind, Greta. I love you a great deal and I wouldn't want to do you an injustice."

Greta felt quick fear. "I don't understand, darling."

"The mink was lovely, of course. But that other coat in the window. The Russian sable, I believe it was marked. I thought it very beautiful."

Greta laughed. "So did I, Donald. I'll tell you a secret. I liked it better than the mink."

His eyes were large. "You did? I'm very glad of that. You see it's a little difficult when we don't agree on what's nicest. The making is much harder. I can make what I like much easier, so if you like it too—"

Greta knelt down and put her arms around Donald. "Darling—can I be with you this time? Can I—watch you make it?"

He regarded her for some time as though mulling over a knotty problem.

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He finished with his dish and laid it carefully on the sink.

"I don't see why not. I love you very much. I like to have you with me."

Greta kissed him swiftly and, while he didn't get at all excited, it seemed to please him. He solemnly stroked her cheek. "We'll finish the dishes, Greta. Then I'll make you a coat."

Reality—unreality, Greta thought warmly. There was no line drawn between them. It was merely a matter of knowledge.

....It is within the mind's power to create....

"I'll finish the dishes dear. You rest. Lie down on the lounge. I'll come in when I'm finished."

"If you wish me to," Donald said. He quietly left the kitchen.

TEN minutes later when Greta entered the living room, the child was seated primly on the lounge. He said, "I'm sorry, Greta. I promised you but it came so quickly. The image was so perfect. He pointed to the shimmering Russian sable on the lounge beside him.

Greta caught her breath. "Oh my darling! It's—it's priceless!"

"It's very beautiful."

Greta ran her fingers through the rich fur. The fierce heat of possession was upon her. She took Donald's hand and they went upstairs.

They talked for a while in Donald's room and then Greta put him to bed. He lay watching her with that unblinking solemnity before she left him. As she closed the door a quick, chilling thought assailed her. A realization.

Not since his earliest babyhood had she ever seen Donald asleep! Strange this had never occurred to her before. But he'd been such a good baby—such a good child. Always into bed without protest. But always the great liquid eyes upon her—at night when she left him—in the morning when she came for him; always lying so quietly, wide-eyed, waiting for her.

Greta went into her bedroom and sat with the coat over her knees. Distress now, at realizing how futile it was. A Russian sable for Richard's wife? Impossible. Explain to Richard? Her every instinct cried out against it. Richard wouldn't understand—couldn't understand. His precise, orthodox mind would reel. Richard was not mentally equipped to receive such a stunning truth from the unknown.

But could she deceive him? Fur coats—new dresses. He was singularly unobserving. But—

Greta hid the coat far back in her closet, feeling a vague resentment as she did so. A resentment mainly toward herself rather than Richard. She lay awake for a long time, thinking, while the house was still and Richard breathed evenly beside her. There was a way. There had to be a way. Of course.

Money.

A FEW days later she stopped at the bank with Donald. The First Trust. Very modern. Electric eyes to open the outer door before you reached it. This should please Donald.

But Donald knew exactly where the electric eye was located. He explained it to his mother. "Your body breaks the beam causing—"

"Yes, darling." For the first time, Greta felt a twinge of fear. "Isn't it nice in here? All the modern furniture?"

Donald looked about solemnly. "I don't like it. It's cold. It doesn't have the warmth of real beauty."

Greta got two brand-new ten dollar bills. On the way home she was filled with heady anticipation.

She showed them to him in the

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living room that night after supper. Laid them on the lounge side by side. "Aren't they pretty, darling? With enough of these we can have all the things we want. Do you think you could make some of these for mother?"

Donald picked up one of the bills. He examined it curiously. Laid it down. "It's only paper. No, I don't think it's very pretty, Greta. Only paper."

"But Donald!"

"Do you think it's pretty?"

"Yes, Donald. Very pretty."

The child sat primly, with his hands folded, looking at her.

"We could have many things, dear. Many pretty things." There was a thickness in her voice and throat from the frustration, the annoyance of his senseless objections.

He shook his head slowly, unhappily.

"Donald! Don't be so stubborn!"

He raised his eyes to hers. It was as though she'd struck him. His lip trembled. "I'll make pretty things for you, Greta. All of them you want. But this—this isn't—"

Greta took him fiercely in her arms. "I'm sorry, darling. Very sorry. Mother is tired. You forgive me, don't you?"

"That isn't necessary. I love you very much."

Greta put the bills back into her purse. She put Donald to bed and then paced the living-room floor. There had to be a way!

There was.

LORBER Brothers catered to the elite. They had a branch on Third Street. Not nearly so large as their big store in the city, but their stock was exquisite.

Greta waited three days until Richard had his meeting with the faculty in Deem's hall far across the campus. Then she put on the sable coat and took Donald down to Lorber Brothers.

The coat generated great respect. She looked at diamond necklaces while Donald stood soberly watching.

"Isn't this one beautiful, darling?"

The child agreed. "Pretty—pretty."

Greta left when the clerk grew impatient....

MADGE BENTON had shining little predatory teeth that seemed to chew at the hard-rubber of the telephone transmitter. "—walking into Lorber's as big as you please with Donald. Honestly, my dear, I almost fainted. That coat! Russian sable no less, my dear... Of course it was Greta! Don't you think I know an old friend when I see her?... No. I didn't stop. I went right on. I'd have been no end embarrassed facing her. What?... Don't make me laugh! At least fifteen thousand dollars, if I know furs. And on Richard's salary? Don't be naive, darling!"

"DONALD, you were going to let me watch you make the coat, remember? I'd like very much to watch this time. It must be wonderful."

Donald considered. He shook his head. "Not really. There's very little to it. So very simple."

"You'll make me a necklace? And let me watch?"

"Yes, Greta." He laid a gentle hand on her arm. "I love you very much. I like to give you pretty things."

They went to Donald's room. Richard had gotten him a small table and chair, a little blue table. He sat in the chair with his hands folded on the table for all the world like a tot in kindergarten trying to please the teacher with perfect posture. Greta sat on the edge of his bed, every muscle tense to the point of aching.

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Donald closed his eyes and appeared to be praying. He sat for two or three minutes and Greta decided that rather than prayer it was more like a nap. Perfectly composed; entirely calm.

Five minutes and tiny drops of perspiration appeared on Donald's forehead. He opened his eyes. He seemed afraid of offending Greta. "I'm sorry. Nothing happens. Maybe I have to be alone. I don't know why I should have to be alone but maybe that's the way it is."

Tiny tendrils of fear passed up Greta's spine. "All right, darling. I'll wait in my room."

She waited ten minutes before Donald came in and handed her a diamond necklace. He looked tired, drawn, but he brightened when he saw how pleased she was.

Greta, concerned with his exceptional weariness, felt justified in hurrying him to bed as soon as possible. She kissed him goodnight and tiptoed out, turning in the doorway to see the glow of the small nightlight in his eyes.

She hurried to her own room and sat breathless, staring at the necklace. There were nineteen matched stones in the piece and Greta heard herself whispering, "Thousands—thousands—and only the beginning." She suddenly lay back across the bed, weak from the impact of sudden wealth. She allowed the hard brilliance of the gems to lie cold across her face, thrilling to their touch.

TWO DAYS later, Greta went to the city, ostensibly for some shopping. "It will be a very quick trip, darling, and I'm afraid it would tire you. So you wait until next time. Next week we'll go to the city together. We'll go to the zoo and see all the animals. Will you like that?"

There was hurt in Donald's expression but he hid it well. "That will be very nice. I like to be with you wherever you are."

She knelt and hugged him impetuously. "And you will be with me, darling. Always."

Greta had already taken the necklace apart. She carried with her its largest stones, having hidden the rest in a flower garden behind the house.

Also, she carried in her bag a notation of the city's three largest jewelry establishments. Of the three, she finally selected one and sailed in with her head held high.

"I would like an appraisal on some diamonds."

The young man wore a very high collar and an air of sincere politeness. "We will be most happy to serve you, madame."

Greta poured the diamonds on a velvet pad expecting a rection of surprise. This reaction was not forthcoming. The young man picked up one of the stones delicately and held it to an eye piece.

Greta felt a sudden wave of fear. The questions. She swiftly decided to forestall them. "These are a part of a necklace my great-grandmother owned. It was passed down to me. It was broken some time ago and the diamonds have lain in my bank vault for a long time. Now I am in need of some cash."

The young man had no comment. He inspected a few more of the stones and then laid the eye piece on the velvet pad. "I would like to call our Mr. Saunders. He would have the last word in matters such as this."

Greta waited, suddenly glad she was seated as her knees had become weak. The young man went silently away and Greta took herself fiercely in hand.

Why should she tremble? She had stolen nothing. She was no thief and

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there was no necessity of feeling or acting like one. But the enormity of the whole affair smote her. She closed her eyes tightly and the room spun around her. Suppose they were no good. Suppose this were all a huge hoax of some kind!

But the warmth of Russian sable was there to steady and to reassure. She opened her eyes and stroked the fur. The thrill, the heady triumph, came back.

MR. SAUNDERS was older and not quite so sincerely polite. Possibly a trifle more businesslike. He introduced himself—rather pointedly, Greta thought, and waited.

New panic swept her. This had not come into her mind during the planning. A name. Identification! There had to be a name! A false one?

"Mrs. Richard Laurel," she said rather coldly. "Charing Lane, Wingstead. My husband is a professor at Wingstead College."

"And you wish to sell these diamonds?"

In Mr. Saunders words, Greta read a hidden meaning: *Your husband also wishes to sell these diamonds?*

He didn't say that! He didn't say that, Greta told herself fiercely. "Yes. If the cash value is high enough. It is not a distress sale, however."

Mr. Saunders smiled bleakly. "That would make no difference, Mrs. Laurel. We would insist on paying a fair price under any conditions."

"That's very good of you."

"You'll pardon me while I appraise the gems?"

"Certainly." Greta got up and walked to a counter filled tastefully with watches, each in a velvet box. She stared at them, but unseeing. She turned almost with guilt to see Mr. Saunders hunched over the velvet pad. Greta forced herself to count to a hundred before she strolled casually back and sat down.

Mr. Saunders straightened and began adding figures on a pad of paper. "I would take responsibility for making a blanket offer of thirty-nine thousand dollars, madame."

Greta caught her breath, then forced a calm face. "So little?"

Saunders shrugged. "After all—they are loose stones. If madame would care to have an independent appraisal made—"

"That won't be necessary."

"Madame would want the check certified?"

Madame wanted no check of any kind. She wanted cash. But asking for so large an amount in green money was out of the question.

"No. Your regular check will be perfectly all right."

Greta left the store with a burning face. Then, furious with herself, her lips firmed. Why did she feel for all the world like a thief?

During the ride home on the suburban, she kept the check clutched tightly in her hand. She watched the green hills rush by. She strove to make a decision. The miles unrolled and when the train pulled into the vine-covered Wingstead station, the decision had been made:

She would have to tell Richard.

Regardless of how much she dreaded the task, it had to be done. After all, there was proof. Faced with what she could lay before him, he would have to believe her. But how would he react even with the believing? Somehow, she could not conceive of her husband as having stature enough to remain upright under such shattering truth.

Or take advantage of it.

She walked the five blocks home, making final plans. She would tell him tonight. After Donald was in bed and

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everything was quiet. After she'd rested a while from the exertions of the day.

Donald waited for her on the porch. He smiled gently and took her hand. "I love you very much, Greta. I have been waiting for you."

"I hurried home, darling. I'll change and get supper. There will be just the two of us tonight."

"No. Father is home."

GRETA FELT a chill. She glanced at the coat over her arm. It had been a warm walk. Too warm for Russian sable. "You wait here, Donald. I'll put my things away and be right down."

She tiptoed past the closed door of Richard's study. Into her room. Richard was standing by the bed.

"Where did you get that expensive coat, Greta?"

He looked frail and old. His face was gray and seemed strangely lifeless.

"Richard, you frightened me."

"Where did you get the coat?" he held out a hand and poured a small pile of diamonds on the bed. "And these. I saw you bury them last night. "Who is the man, Greta?"

Possibly, with the stage properly set, she could have told him—made him believe. Now—

"Who is the man?"

Greta laughed—laughter charged with hysteria. "Richard! Don't be ridiculous!"

"Does a husband make himself ridiculous by inquiring where his wife gets expensive gifts?"

Greta passed a hand over her tired brow. "Not now—please not now. There is an explanation—not at all what you think. But give me a little time." She sank down on the bed.

There was no anger in his voice. Only bitterness. "I've known so much for so long, but I never asked because I didn't want to be told." Richard was sitting down now, his eyes closed—talking into darkness. "The rumors—the whispered words over the years. Like a coward I ignored them because I was afraid of the truth. But I have eyes. I can see. I can see a son who does not look like me—who looks like a child out of India. And it's indeed strange how so many people know so much about something they should have no way of knowing."

"Richard, please."

She could have as well remained silent. It was as though he hadn't heard her. "Like a child from India with strange blood, and all these years I've closed my ears. Now—now I've been forced. I must speak and demand. It has become too flagrant—too open to accept."

"Please, Richard."

Then it was as though another woman spoke through her; as though all the fears and the weariness and the hot hopes had been built into another woman using her lips. She was a fishwife, screaming.

"—and no money! Never any money! Only a doddering college town with gossips and small-minded people until I was ready to go mad!"

There was much more with Richard not seeming to hear. Then Donald was standing in the doorway, his dark eyes upon her—his face expressionless. Richard got up stiffly and walked out of the room. A moment later his study door closed.

Richard Laurel did it with a gun he kept in his drawer. Quite accurately through the left temple, and there was scarcely any blood. Greta found him lying forward over his desk. There was no note. Greta fainted.

AFTER THE first shock, she was surprised at her own strength—at the composure with which she was able to take it. Poor, futile, frustrated Richard. Possibly it was the best of

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all endings for him. He'd taken the proud man's way. Poor, bewildered, mistaken Richard.

Greta found her chief worry to be Donald. How would he react? He had never before seen death. It would be a shock. Could it possibly shatter his priceless gift? Greta trembled at the thought.

She kept him away—out of direct contact as much as possible. Only at the funeral did he walk close and actually see his father in the coffin. And then Greta whisked him away as soon as possible.

They rode back from the cemetery, Greta's mind full of taking up the loose ends and leaving Wingstead forever. She frankly admitted it would be a relief.

MADGE BENTON'S predatory little teeth gnashed at the telephone transmitter. "Oh, my dear—really! You have no idea of the shock. And so soon after Richard's suicide... Yes, I was the one who found her and they're still trying to figure it out. The people who take care of that sort of thing aren't talking—they're just plain bewildered. They've questioned the child, but after all he's only five years old—what can they expect? I have a feeling the truth will never be known... Yes, his name is Donald—and I tell you, Grace, there's something strange about that child—I'll never forget it—never—

"—walking into that room—walking in and seeing that coffin standing in the middle of the living room—Greta lying in it—her still white face.

"—and that dreadful child standing beside it, stroking the gray silk lining—saying 'pretty—pretty—pretty'—over and over again."

THE END

IN science-fiction we've given such free rein to our imaginations that we sometimes ignore the line between fantasy and extrapolated science. This is good entertainment, of course, but bad science. A few writers limit themselves to flitting around the Solar System, but most take *inter-* and *intra*-galactic travel in their stride. Of all the dreams of Mankind, this particular one, along with the concept of time-travel, seems remotest. For we run into that damnable barrier, that rock-ribbed rule of science which seems inviolable—nothing material can exceed the velocity of light!

Let's examine the picture. Even if we could travel with the velocity of light, the galaxies would be beyond our reach since their distances are often measured in millions and tens of millions of light-years. Assuming that we could travel with light's speed we would be restricted to only the relatively near stars, unless we make our ship a miniature self-contained planet in whose hulk generations would be born and die before the goal was reached.

Knowing how strongly the light-velocity barrier seems to permeate physical theory and experiment, it seems quite likely that we will never be able to leave our Solar System even if we do attain interplanetary travel with chemical and atomic rockets, save for perhaps life-time trips to the very nearest stars, starting with Alpha Centauri, whose distance from Earth is *merely* four light-years. Thus it appears that the galaxies and stellar clouds will forever remain dots on photographic plates, or little specks in the heavens.

It is not inconceivable, of course, that some destructive concept might render this judgment premature. Perhaps scientific research will disclose some way to change this apparently immutable law. S-F writers have suggested some ingenious techniques, the most logical being the "mass-neutralizer" and the "inertia-destroyer", which reduces the mass of an object to zero, thus removing the bugaboo of the "material thing". The very fact that we can conceive of this rather strange concept is encouraging.

So, while we may believe pretty strongly now that interstellar and inter-galactic wandering are impossible and will be impossible forever, there is the slight logical wedge of "maybe..." Let's hope that this wedge will be driven deeply and that some glorious day Man will be able to reach the stars!

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the STAR GRABBERS

By H. B. Hickey

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For the first time in six hundred years, Earthmen struck back at their Martian conquerors. But the habit of slavery can be deep-rooted . . .

THE FIRST blow was struck on a bright May afternoon in the year 2557 in a district known as Blurij, not far distant from the valley of the Tenasee.

It was a *taken.* Older women and children wailed in the streets of the village. The men stood herded like cattle with their heads bowed, waiting to be led away. And now the dragoons from the two silver ships in the meadow were making their rounds, taking their choice of the girls and younger women.

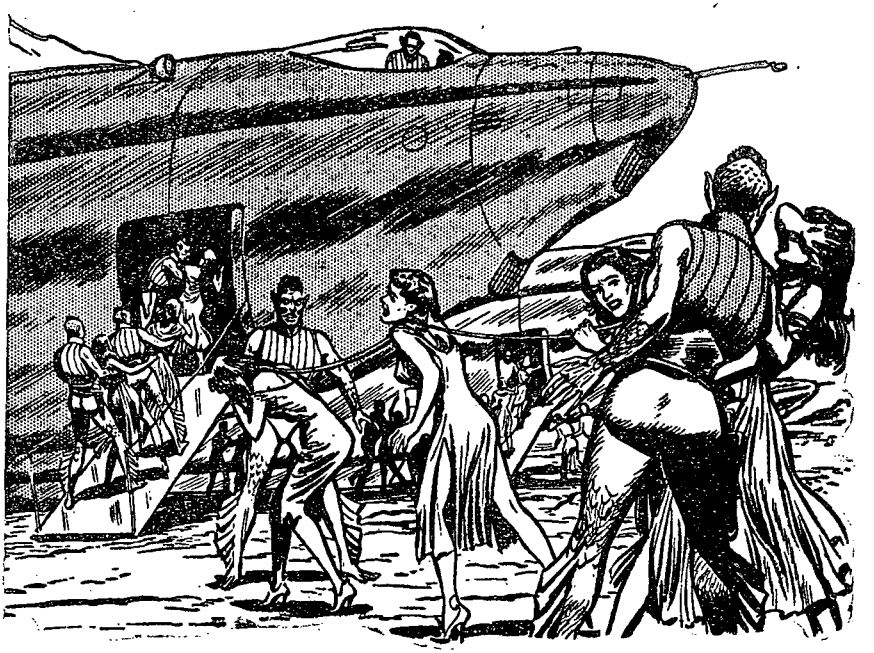
A pea-green, barrel-bodied Martian emerged from a house, his round, red eyes gleaming as he dragged a girl behind him.

"Ykim," he gurred. "Look! A prize for the pleasure houses!"

He held her for Ykim to see. She was tall, well formed. A rip with his hand and her charms were exposed, her single garment falling around her feet. Long green fingers writhed about her.

"And this one," Ykim said, showing the woman he held. "A breeder. She'll produce workers aplenty."

He flung the woman to the other dragoon and stalked into the next house on the street. The houses were



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shacks, and this one seemed to be empty.

But Ykim knew better. These Earthwomen would sometimes try to hide. Probably thought it increased their value. Foolish of them, of course. Pleasure types brought certain prices, breeders others, workers a much lower price. None of them brought too much; they were used up so quickly.

He peered behind a cloth screen that divided two beds. Nothing there. He looked under the beds. Nothing there either. Only one more possibility, a closet. He opened it.

She was a beauty, tall, raven haired, her breasts swelling the bodice of her thin garment. Ykim paused to consider the price she might bring. Like one plucking a delicate fruit, he reached out for her.

She darted under his arm. He whirled, barely missed her shoulder. The screen got between them and she tipped it backward as she ran. Ykim flung it aside and found she had almost gained the back door.

He went after her, six feet of fighting man with trained reflexes. By the time she got her feet on the ground, he was right behind her. His hand flicked out and fell on her shoulder. But she twisted away again.

There was a man standing in the back yard, leaning against a tree. Taller than Ykim, and wider in the shoulders, with tawny hair and tawny, easy eyes. An Earthman.

"Seize her!" Ykim barked.

The Earthman stirred, but seemed to have trouble getting started. It turned out Ykim didn't need any help. A spin, a twist, and he had the girl.

Once caught, resistance went out of her. She stood submissively with her eyes downcast while Ykim took a handful of her hair in his clutch. But when he began to fondle her with his free hand, she shuddered.

"Don't do that," the Earthman said.

Ykim stared. An Earthman! This one looked to be a farmer type, probably from the terraces of Blurij. Something must be wrong with him. Perhaps it was a mistake; perhaps he hadn't really spoken.

"Don't do that," the Earthman said again, and this time Ykim knew he had heard right.

One hand still clutching the girl, he freed the other hand and calmly reached for his holster. But he was too calm, too slow.

With a leap like a cat at a bird, the Earthman was on him. A fist came up in an arc that terminated at the point of Ykim's jaw. The jaw tilted upward sharply, too sharply. There was a crack and Ykim lay flat on the ground.

There was a suspended moment, when time stood still. The girl stared at the prostrate Martian in wide-eyed disbelief. The Earthman, too, was unbelieving. He looked down, stared at his still closed fist.

"You struck him," the girl said. Her voice was awed.

FOR MORE than six hundred years, not a hand had been lifted against a man of Mars, not a voice had been raised. Not since the night the silvery ships first appeared in the sky of Earth.

A single blast, a single moment, and the capitals of Earth were no more. Then the ships landed. Earth breezes wafted strange gases; strange rays lanced Earth's night. Portholes opened and the men of Mars emerged.

So had begun the subjugation of a planet.

With cold calculation, with brutal efficiency, the job was done. Overnight, the factories of Earth worked for Mars, making new products, strange devices. Overnight, the fertile fields of Earth were tilled for Mars.

Overnight, the culture of a planet

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was gone, an alien culture imposed. Schooling existed, but only for necessary technologists. In two generations, the names of immortals were erased from Earth's memory. History was gone; only legend remained.

Takens were accepted as a matter of course, the word itself coined from the deed. Ships would suddenly appear, and families were torn asunder as the dragoons took those they chose. No one taken ever returned. Just as well, rumor said.

And from the first day to this, there had not been a finger lifted in resistance, not a voice raised....

"WHERE ARE you taking me?" the girl asked.

For an hour they had been travelling fast and she was out of breath. The town and the meadow lay behind and below them, for they were well up a rugged hillside.

"Some place where they won't find us," the man replied. "Tired?"

"Yes."

He swung her lightly to his shoulder and moved upward, her weight seeming not to slow him at all. For an hour he continued to carry her, and then she asked to be put down.

They paused for a while in a small hollow and she looked at him again, seeing the height and breadth of him. His tawny eyes were serious now, but there was a light in them that would not be quenched. As he carried her close, she had detected about him a strange odor, but now it was not so noticeable.

"You struck him," she said again, still not believing what her own eyes had seen.

He himself was only just beginning to believe it. He looked at his fist and smiled.

"Hit him? I killed him!"

"You won't smile when they catch us." Her tone was somber.

Her eyes blazed with fear as he clapped a big hand over her mouth. But then she saw that he didn't mean to harm her. He was listening, listening intently.

Then she heard it, the sound of a body moving through the underbrush. The sound was near the hollow now, and the tawny man removed his hand from her mouth and glided away. At the lip of the hollow, he paused.

More movement and sound, and the brush parted. The tawny man leaped forward, ready to strike. He caught himself in midair, his hands unclasping before he landed.

"An Earthman!"

The intruder turned, his eyes wild with fright. He was short, dark, thick as an oak tree through the chest. A day's growth of black beard sprouted on his face, black hair curled up at the throat of his tunic.

"I...I..." he mumbled, still bewildered. "Wha—?"

"You're all right," the tawny one told him. "How did you get up here?"

"I was on my way to work, at the factory. I took the wrong road, unthinking. I would have been an hour late. They would have punished me. So I kept going."

"Your name?"

"Crag. Ben Crag."

"I'm Reb Stuart," the tawny one said. He looked to the girl.

"Loa," she said simply.

THEY TOLD Crag, as they went on upward, how they came to be here, and there was a long pause while he demanded the details. In the end, he had to believe them. No one could have imagined such a thing.

"To strike a Martian," he muttered. "How could you even think of such a thing?"

"I didn't stop to think," Stuart admitted. "Now, come on. The cave is up ahead."

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"What cave?"

But Stuart was silent. He plunged ahead now, taking them further into the wild hills. They went down a slope, up another, and suddenly they were stopped before a thick clump of bushes.

Stuart pushed the bushes aside, revealing an opening behind them. The girl and Crag followed him through, into what seemed a small cave. Stuart vanished briefly into the half gloom and then reappeared with something white.

He scratched a match and the white thing flamed. It was a tall candle. Stuart set the candle in a niche while Crag and Loa looked about.

The cave was not small, but huge. In a far corner, there were great kettles of copper and coils of copper tubing. Casks and jugs stood against the walls.

"What are those?" Loa asked. Stuart shrugged his shoulders.

"How did you find this place?" Crag wanted to know.

"I played near here as a child. I still come here often, and one day recently I found it. Probably been waiting here like this since the days of the Autority."

"That long?" Loa whispered.

"It can't be as long as we think," Stuart told her. "I had a great-grandfather who claimed Effdee Arr was a man, not a spirit."

Crag snorted. "And I suppose the Autority who protected the Valley was also a man!"

He shook his head at Stuart. Of course, a man who could strike a Martian might think of anything. That had to be considered.

"What made you strike him?" Crag demanded.

"Felt like it. That's all I know. I suddenly felt like it." Stuart shrugged, disclaiming motive. But, suddenly, his eyes were alight.

"It must have been the strong water!" He ran to a cask and turned a spigot. Clear, colorless liquid spurted.

"It had an odor, but I thought it would be safe to drink," Stuart said. "So I had some before I went down today. It burned, but it made me feel good. It made me feel sort of wild."

He let some run into his cupped palms and offered Crag a drink. The thick man gulped, gasped, sputtered and choked. The odor, both he and Loa noticed, was the same as what had been on Stuart's breath.

"It—it can't be water," Crag said huskily. "But what is it?"

"Perhaps something made by a strange process with these utensils," Stuart shrugged. "How do you feel?"

"Odd." Crag seemed confused. "I feel warm. But good. I feel strong."

"Never mind how you feel!" That was Loa, anger and fear mixed in her tone. "How will we feel when they catch us? I've seen men flayed for pleasure, tortured for diversion. Think what they'll do to us."

There was silence while they considered the terrifying possibilities. Then, suddenly, Reb Stuart's face contorted with anger. He lifted his hands and stared at them.

"Do to us?" he shouted. "Think! Think! With these hands I killed one of them! They're Martians, but they die! Twist hard enough, and their bones will break. Squeeze, and they'll choke. Just like you and I. Just like Earthmen."

His voice faded to a hoarse whisper. "What they'll do to us? Think what we might do to them!"

"You've gone mad!" The two voices were as one.

STUART whirled on them.

"No, I'm not mad. And it isn't the strong water. That's out of me now. I'm awake, and I know my

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strength. You, Crag, what was your job?"

"I supervised. A hundred workers."

"Then you've had training. You're no fool. Nor I. I was overseer for a farm. I can fix machines. You, Loa?"

"Repairs on small fighting craft."

"You see?" Stuart demanded. "We have hands, we have brains. Once men walked this earth. Men! Our ancestors must have left the strong water just to show me the way. Now I know what can be done."

Loa laughed weakly and Ben Crag echoed her. Wild talk, crazy talk.

"Just three of us," Loa said. "Against all the dragoons of Mars."

"Just three," Stuart admitted. "But three seeds. I've planted seeds and watched them grow."

He waved their protests away. "What can they do to us that they wouldn't do now? What can we lose?"

This time, there was a moment's pause before they replied. Loa was watching him, and in her eyes there was a light of admiration, of more than admiration.

"Lose? Nothing," she said. "When do we start?"

"Right now. We investigate this cave."

Holding the candle aloft, he took the lead. The cave narrowed, then widened again into a great chamber. More casks, but nothing else. Nothing but a small cave and a larger one. And yet, Stuart didn't seem discouraged.

"Room here for a hundred," he said. "They'd never find us here."

"What good's a hundred?" Crag demanded. "And how will we get them?"

"Go back."

He said it simply, as though he were asking them to return from a short walk. But he might have exploded a shell with less dramatic results.

"Now I know you're crazy!" Crag said with a snort.

"Maybe not. I looked back a few times coming up here. The two ships took off. There was no chase. They'd never think of an Earthman killing a Martian. So they must have thought this one fell and broke his neck."

Stuart shrugged. "Sure, I'll take a beating. So will you, Crag. But they don't generally kill supervisors. And I guess we've been beaten before."

"With less to gain," Crag admitted. "But who—?"

"Pick a man, maybe two. We each know at least one we can trust. One who'd be useful."

Crag rubbed his stubbly chin. The doubt was gone now, and there was the beginning of belief. Somehow, Stuart had made him see this thing. Somehow, it could be done. Three lives—against a planet to gain.

"My hand," said Ben Crag. His fingers were like bands of metal.

"And mine," said Loa. Stuart took it gently.

THE BEGINNING was not easy. In a corner of the room, a large machine stood. And on a dais behind it a Martian of rank, jewels glittering on his uniform. His eyes surveyed the tall Earthman flanked by two guards.

"You did not get lost," the Martian said. Actually, he had no suspicion; it was just a formality, an old routine which once had meaning.

"I lost my way," the Earthman said quietly.

"We'll see. Strap him in."

The guards moved quickly, hustling the big man with the tawny hair toward the machine. His arms fitted into loops of metal, his chest pressed against a metal plate. Behind him, another plate swung inward against his back.

"Once," the Martian said.

Stuart's body jerked. Tongues of

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living flame etched their way across his bare back, ate into him. He wanted to scream, and bit his lips to hold back the scream.

"I lost my way," he said dully.

"Of course. You'll remember not to do it again. Once more."

Again the flame biting into him, and this time a thousand times worse. Agony added to agony. His teeth met through the flesh of his lip and blood ran over his chin.

"I'll remember," he said.

"Of course. Once more, to make certain he remembers."

And this was the worst. Worse than a thousand beatings. Worse, it seemed to Stuart, than death itself. Excruciating pain, a thousand times compounded.

Better to have told, his mind said. Six hundred years of serfdom had left their mark. But instinct was stronger. His teeth clamped down again, and there was the salty taste of blood in his mouth....

AND IN ANOTHER room, in a room much the same, except that it was in a factory rather than the hydroponics division of a farm, a similar scene was taking place.

The Martian wore the same sort of jewels, there were the two guards, and there was an Earthman. This Earthman was short, dark, wide as a door across the shoulders.

"There was a *taken*. I was stopped by dragoons," the Earthman said.

"You should have explained to them," came the reply.

"I tried. They did not want to listen."

"Beast. If you'd had the intelligence to explain properly... But it's true they are somewhat impulsive. Well, once will teach you." The gurring voice rose. "Once. Full strength."

And again the agony of flame etching its way across a man's back. And again a man tasting salt blood as he bit back the screams.

The girl was fortunate. She had not missed a moment's work. She worked her regular shift, fourteen hours without rest or food.

SEEDS, nourished with blood, and they fell on barren ground. A week, another week, and there were only six in the cave. Four men and two women; no more.

The male newcomers were brothers; tall, gaunt men with shallow chests and high foreheads. They were Paul and Verne Richards, recruited from the factory by Crag. Their mother had been carried away twenty years before, and their sister in the last *taken*.

Loa had brought the woman. This one had shoulders almost as wide as Crag's and stood an inch taller. Thick black hair flew about her heavy, hard features. She was not unpleasant to look at, only rough hewn. Her hands were big and calloused. Her name was Molly Pitch.

"Women," Crag grunted sourly when he saw her. "It's men we need."

Loa was embarrassed, but the other woman patted her shoulder. "It's those stripes they gave him. Spoils your disposition for a while."

"How do you know I got stripes?" Crag demanded.

"Your lips." She reached out and ran a surprisingly gentle finger across his lips. "If you've got guts, you bite back the screams."

"You know a lot, don't you?" He glared at her, and then his eyes widened. On her lower lip was a long scar where the lip had been bitten through.

"But they never do that to women!"

"Don't they?" the rough woman laughed. "Some time I'll tell you a few of the things they've done to me.

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It'll curl your hair."

Then the laughter had fled her voice. She glared around. "Well? What are we here for?"

Leadership had fallen to Reb Stuart from the first, and now it was he who did the talking. His face was glum as he surveyed the three newcomers. His tawny eyes, once easy and relaxed, were now hard and direct.

"We can't get others to join us. Two weeks, and there are only six of us. Do you want to know why?"

Five heads nodded. "You believe in this, don't you? You believe that if one Martian can be destroyed, they can all be destroyed. Right?"

The heads bobbed again. They didn't know where this line was taking him, but they listened. His eyes were hot now, seeming to spark.

"But nobody else believes it! Nobody else knows it! Crag told you fellows because he could trust you. Loa told Molly. But nobody else knows how that Martian died. They wouldn't believe it if we told them. We've been afraid even to hint at it."

"True," Verne Richards interrupted, his thin, clever face puzzled. "But what's the answer?"

"This. Hang out a banner that men with guts will flock to! Show them something that will open their eyes!"

"Like what?" Richards demanded.

Stuart told them.

THROUGH high haze the quarter-moon glowed faintly. Against the darkness of the night, the square administration building was but a darker block. Six figures crept toward it.

Stuart and Crag each shouldered a heavy sack. The Richards brothers swung another between them. Molly and Loa were empty handed.

"All right," Stuart whispered.

They were within fifty yards of a corner of the building when they dropped to the ground. They waited. And in a while, their patience was rewarded. Two guards appeared, one around the corner and one from the further end of the building.

It was a meaningless vigil they kept, a patrol for which there had never been any necessity. But orders were orders; they spoke for but a few seconds, then resumed their ordered pacing. One disappeared around the far corner, the other came toward the six figures.

Stuart stirred, touched the big woman's muscular arm. "All right, Molly."

She rose and moved off, her steps strangely silent on the hard ground. She was almost on the guard before he saw her. His arms swung up.

"What is it?" he growled.

"I was ordered to bring something." She was quite close now, peering into his face. "It must have been another guard." And then her gaze swivelled. "Oh, there he is!"

She had learned her part well. The guard's eyes followed hers, widened with astonishment as he saw no one. Then, steel fingers closed about his throat.

While the five waited, frozen with tension, a terrible struggle began. Stuart could have silenced him quickly, so could Crag. But they had had to risk this. A woman had a better chance to get close without arousing suspicion.

And Molly Pitch was incredibly strong. The guard flung himself around, tore at his throat to loose the grip that was choking him. His heels raked her shins. But she clung grimly, bore him to earth and held until he went limp, his final paroxysm over.

Then, quickly, her hands were at his belt. He wore a knife in a short scabbard, a gun in a holster. Molly chose the knife. As she darted around the corner, it gleamed dully in her hand.

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"Now!" Stuart ordered.

They were up and moving as fast as they could. The time for caution was over. If Molly succeeded, well and good. If not, it wouldn't matter anyway.

By the time they reached the building, she was already coming back, her square face lit by a grin of triumph. She still had the knife and it was wet.

And now, Paul Richards took over. He and his brother had worked in mines. They knew how to set a charge, where to place it so that it would do the most good.

There was none of the explosive in the sacks to waste. It had taken weeks of patient pilfering to garner this much.

A whole sack went against the corner of the building, a half sack along each of the adjacent sides, smaller portions at strategic points on the far walls. Then it was done, and the brothers were stringing fuses. A light flickered and died.

"Run for it!"

They ran, ran as fast as they could. A half mile away, they were still running, when behind them flame erupted skyward. The ground shook. For a moment they paused, steadied themselves, then ran on.

The second blow had been struck.

"I DON'T get it," Ben Crag growled. "Two weeks since we blew that place, and nothing happens. It ain't right, and it's got me worried."

The meeting had been over for a while and there were only the four, Loa, Molly, Crag and Stuart left in the cave. Crag had been pacing the floor worriedly, and now at last he had spoken aloud what many had been thinking.

Stuart watched him. The tawny man had changed. There was still that recklessness in his eyes, and the hint of violence, but leadership had changed him some. He was silent now, more often than not.

He had guessed right about the effect of spectacular action. Over a hundred men now in the immediate organization, and the number limited only by their inability to screen men more rapidly. A hundred picked men, Stuart had felt, were more important at the start than ten thousand with the chains of slavery still binding their minds.

"Something's happened," he said now. "Ten men have died, and I'd swear every last one confessed to the crime he didn't commit."

"But not a single proclamation, not a—"

"Naturally. Akrim's no fool. As governor of the province, he can't afford to admit publicly what happened. But now, if his superiors find out, he can claim he handled the whole thing quietly, stamped out the revolt before it got started."

"Ah," Crag said. "So that's it. Makes sense, all right." But admiration of Stuart's reasoning did not wipe out his frown. "Akrim might know better, though."

"That's what I'm worried about," Stuart admitted. "Sooner or later..." He looked up as four men entered the cave. "Something more to worry about."

HE HAD NOTICED these four often. Recruited from a quarrying gang, they stuck together closely. Physically they were giants, all of them a full head taller than Stuart's six feet two inches. As they lumbered forward, their tangled masses of hair swaying, they looked like a matched team of draught animals.

"Yes?" Stuart said quietly.

"Want to talk to you," one replied gruffly. He glowered at Crag.

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"You can say what you have to." Stuart was curt.

The glare shifted to him. "Damn right we'll say it. We don't like this setup. Who gave you the right to order us around? Steal a drill, bring in a sack of high explosive, do this, do that—"

"Anything else?"

"Yeah." The giant's head jerked toward Loa. "No risks, and the finest wench—"

Reb Stuart hit him. There was no warning; the transformation from relaxed silence to unleashed fury was instantaneous. All the weight and strength of his body flowed upward in a single blow that ended at the point of the giant's jaw.

Like a tree toppling, the huge man crashed. He was no Martian; it would take a sledge to crack his neck. But he was going to be out for quite some time.

Caught off guard, his companions stood frozen into immobility. Then, one of them swung forward.

Until then, Ben Crag had made no move. Now, he swung into action. A full foot and a half shorter than any of them, he was more than their equal in width. And he had the advantage of a lower center of gravity.

His swinging shoulder caught one across the middle, bunting him aside. A thick hand shot out, paused as it hit a chest, then continued hard. There was the crash of a body against the far wall of the cave. Only one left now.

"You wanted to know," Crag said. "You still want to know?"

The man shook his head dumbly, edging off. He wanted no part of this squat Hercules with the ugly, good humored face. Nor of the tawny man who could appear so deceptively quiet.

The first one still lay on the floor of the cave. The other two had regained their feet, still groggy but able to move. Crag jerked his head and the three lifted their prostrate companion and carried him out.

"And that's the end of that," Ben Crag grinned.

But Reb Stuart had no answering grin. His face was serious, his eyes half closed in thought.

"No," he said. "That's the beginning. It was bound to happen sooner or later. Just as Akrim is bound to ferret out this cave."

"By that time," Molly Pitch said, coming into the conversation, "we'll have a thousand men."

"A thousand men, and not even enough small arms stolen to supply fifty. We couldn't stand off a single platoon."

Ben Crag's face was getting duskier. "What kind of talk is that? You sound like you want to give it up!"

"You know Reb better than that." Loa put her hand on Stuart's arm, ranging herself alongside him.

His appreciation showed itself in one of the few smiles they had seen in a long time. "I'm not quitting. But I do know just how far we can go this way."

"Then what's the answer?"

"We need a new base of operations, where the Martians can't get to us."

"But there's no place on Earth like that!"

"I know. It won't be on Earth."

Molly Pitch went wide-eyed, and Ben's mouth opened foolishly. It was Ben who got the words out first: "You've been drinking that strong water again!"

BUT IT WAS not drink. This thing had been on Stuart's mind a long time. For many days, the realization had grown and been strengthened.

As long as their base remained on Earth, they were doomed to failure. Akrim might be slow, but once he

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realized there was a definite threat to Martian rule, he would act.

The Earthmen wouldn't stand a chance. Outnumbered, weaponless, without a semblance of military training, their attempt at revolt would end in massacre.

Hotter heads had demanded some kind of action. But Stuart had put those ideas down with a firm hand. Overt action would produce instant retaliation.

So he had conceived this plan, thought it through no matter how mad it had seemed. To reconquer this planet, they had to forsake it. Do that, or fail. And now that his mind was set, there was no turning back.

IT WAS late, and he and Loa were alone. He lifted his eyes from the paper work he had been doing.

"You're sure of this fellow at the repair shops?"

"As sure as I can be. Molly and I have talked to him. He's a genius at motors; we know that. If he claims the fields can be stepped up without danger of burnouts, you can bet your life they can."

"We're betting our lives," Stuart reminded her. He stood up. "All right. That little patrol ship will definitely take off by tomorrow night?"

"We finish repairs tomorrow. They pick it up next morning."

"How about armament?"

"That's all set. Even food in the galley. Dion can step up the fields after we're in space, and from then on, we can travel as far and as fast as we must."

Stuart's smile was more than fond. "You believe in me, don't you?"

There was no need for verbal answer. Her eyes gave him all the reply he needed.

"Good. Then here's the final plan. Twenty-five of us will go. I've picked them already. The rest will remain behind. Those will be the nucleus for a silent organization. From now on all direction will be from whatever base we pick in outer space.

"Everything here will go underground. As far as Mars is concerned, all organized resistance will have ended. I hope. A quick search and they'll give us up, probably. And that's when our real work will begin."

Dawn was purpling the sky as they left. Perhaps the last dawn of Earth they would ever see. Only a few minutes to clasp hands and dream their dreams and make their wishes.

Then, Stuart took Loa in his arms and kissed her, tasting the sweetness of her lips, feeling her softness against him. For this moment, he was only a man, with a man's need and passion. And she was the woman he loved.

IT WAS difficult to keep his mind on work. He had to go through the motions, and yet as the day wore on, he found himself making mistakes. Twice he over-acidized immense troughs containing millions of food plants, barely got the neutralizer flowing in time.

So when the guard came to conduct him to Sebrun, the farm manager, Stuart was inwardly calm. It was the end of a long day; the artificial sunlight had been on for an hour already. Sebrun would be tired. He'd content himself with a verbal lashing, a curse for Earthmen's stupidity, maybe a cuff or two.

Then, they were in Sebrun's office. And, suddenly, Stuart knew that this was no reprimand which awaited him. For Sebrun was not tired. Nor was he merely angry.

The Martian's manner was quiet, his eyes bright and hot. Even the jewels he wore seemed to glitter coldly. Tension crackled in the room, and instead of two guards, there were four.

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"Well," Sebrun said. He templed long fingers and his manner became almost philosophical. "We should have expected it, I suppose. But then, military men don't know as much about heredity as you and I, eh Stuart?"

"I don't understand."

"Heredity. The innate bestiality, the animal cunning of your race. They shouldn't have expected to breed it out in twelve generations. It was bound to crop up."

He watched Stuart. "Still don't understand?"

"No."

Then, Sebrun seemed to go mad. He snatched up a paperweight and flung it. Involuntarily, Stuart dodged. The paperweight went past his head and smashed into the wall.

Sebrun was on him then. He smashed Stuart across the mouth, beat at him, kicked him, finally knocked him to the floor.

"The revolt! The sabotage! The destruction of the administration building! Do you understand that, you beast?"

One of the guards lifted Stuart by the hair and held him upright for Sebrun to hit again. But the tawny man held firm.

"I don't understand."

Maybe he could brazen it out. Maybe Sebrun had nothing concrete. It might be just another of those things, all suspicion and no facts. No matter what happened, he'd admit nothing.

Sebrun must have sensed the futility of further questioning. He whirled, shouted at one of the guards: "Bring him in!" Then, as the guard left by another door, he glared at Stuart. "You'll understand, all right!"

Inside, Stuart had turned to ice. So Sebrun had something. It was a question of how much. And that was a question which would be answered in a moment. The sound of feet was in the corridor outside.

Stuart lifted his eyes. The door opened and an Earthman came in, followed by the guard. It was the giant from the quarry, the man Stuart had beaten the night before.

"Well?" Sebrun demanded.

The giant nodded. "It's him. He's the leader."

SO THIS was it. An hour later, and it wouldn't have mattered. Now, it mattered too much. He had foreseen something like this, but he hadn't foreseen it happening so soon.

For himself, it didn't matter so much. But there were the others to think about. There were Crag, and Molly Pitch, and Loa. Especially Loa.

"He lies!" Stuart shouted desperately. He smiled ingratiatingly at Sebrun. "There was a woman, and—"

"I said there was a woman," the giant cut in. "He'll know her name. He knows all of them."

Sebrun grinned, not pleasantly. "He'll tell. He'll tell us everything." Then, to the guard: "Take that one out. Double rations for a month. And a beating every day."

Stuart's mind raced. They'd never break him down. Sebrun couldn't do it; Akrim couldn't do it, either. Not all the diabolical tortures of this alien race could do it.

But that wouldn't stop them. They still had this huge thing that called himself a man. He couldn't name names, but he'd recognize a good many on sight. They'd parade every soul in the territory before him, and he could pick out enough.

There wasn't time to think further. There was only time to act. And with Reb Stuart, thought and action were miraculously synchronized.

Too fast to stop, he sprang. In a single swoop, he had the paperweight from the floor and was driving upward. He caught them completely un-

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prepared. The guard was behind the huge Earthman. Stuart batted him out of the way and swung.

A crack like dry wood snapping, and the giant toppled, the side of his head caved in. He would never betray anyone.

"Grab him!" Sebrun yelled frantically. "Take him alive!"

Unable to use their guns, the guards piled in. Stuart met them head on, fists flailing. A skull cracked as the paperweight landed squarely. The force of the blow knocked the weight loose, but now Stuart had only four of them to face.

With half a chance, he might have succeeded. But they didn't give him that chance. They wouldn't let him get his back against a wall where he could take them all frontally.

From four sides, they came at him. Even as his iron fists shattered flesh and bone, there was a smash at the back of his neck that dazed him. He whirled, and caught another fist full in the face.

They were on him now, beating, kicking, jarring him, bearing him down beneath their combined weight. There wouldn't be much left for Sebrun to do, and Sebrun realized that.

"Enough," he commanded. "You'll kill him."

His voice came to Stuart as from a great distance. There was an immediate stop to hostilities. And, amazingly, there surged through Stuart a fresh burst of strength. He would never get the chance to use it, but it was there.

Or would he get the chance? For, suddenly, there was another voice, a familiar voice.

"Get 'em!" it roared. It was the voice of Ben Crag.

HE CAME through the door and his shoulders barely made it. There was a gun in each hand. And behind him came Molly Pitch, her fingers taut on triggers.

Sebrun spun, digging frantically for his own gun. Crag blasted away and a flash of fire seared the Martian, dropping him in his tracks.

The guards were coming awake now, but too late. Molly shot one down, bludgeoned a second with the barrel of her other gun. And now Stuart was back in action, his fingers a third.

"Come on!" Crag called, and then they were running.

One door led directly to the hydroponics section, the other through the offices. It was the second door through which Crag and Molly had come and through which the three now sped.

The corridors were deserted now, even the usual patrolling guards notable by their absence. Stuart had time to wonder, and then he stopped wondering. For fast as he was running, his eyes had caught sight of a charred figure slumped in a recess.

Then they were outside and slowing down, forced to walk rather than risk attracting attention. For Stuart, it was a welcome breather. The beating he'd taken hadn't helped any. He was thankful for the darkness which concealed the cuts and bruises he bore.

"How in the world—?" he began as they cut across a field.

"Someone saw that trouble maker from the quarry going into your buildings, and smelled something wrong. They reported at once to the cave, where Molly and I were getting things ready for tonight."

"It didn't take much figuring to see what was up," Molly said. She grinned. "The Martians aren't so tough. Only one guard around, and when Ben and I put the screws on him, he told us just where to find you."

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"But the cave. He must have told them about that."

"We cleared out, figuring he would. We also passed on word of a change in plans. We rendezvous near the shops."

"Good thing, too," Molly said. "They've had men drifting up into the hills."

And that, Stuart exulted, was the one good break. It meant a diversion of the Martians' strength, less men to guard the shops. It might mean the difference between success and failure.

"The patrol ship ready?" he asked.

Molly grinned again. "They never got such fast work before. Or such efficient work. It's on the field, ready for a takeoff."

"And Dion, your motor wizard?"

"We smuggled him into the ship. Can't take a chance on him getting hurt."

IT WAS better than good; it was perfect. Almost perfect, anyway. It would have taken more men, heavier weapons, to make success certain. But given the diversion and the element of surprise, Stuart now figured the odds in their favor.

He and Molly and Crag were across the fields now and coming through the thin screen of trees that separated the town itself from the sprawling shops where a majority of its inhabitants worked. He could already see some of the shops; the rest were hidden behind the high wall that surrounded the field.

"The men will be waiting behind that dismantled space cruiser," Crag said, pointing out a huge hull.

Ducking low, they threaded their way across the intervening space. The moon was high now, and one slip could mean disaster.

But there was no slip. And the men were all there, hugging the ground, some of them even inside the hull. Loa was there, briefing a group of ten. And Paul and Verne Richards were there, hugging close their sacks of explosive.

Loa would have come to Stuart's arms, but there were others in the way. Stuart cut their questions short with: "Later. We'd better get going. Everyone knows what he's supposed to do?" They nodded, and he turned to the group to which Loa had been speaking.

"You get a break. Some of their men are up in the hills. You might even break through. But even if you don't, make it seem like the real thing, like a real frontal attack. All set?"

They nodded grimly and Stuart said simply, "Good luck." Then they were off, cutting low and sharp across toward the front of the main building.

In a few seconds, they were lost in the darkness. Then, a short wait and they reappeared, this time very close to the main gate. Stuart heaved a sigh. It was working out.

Now, there were other figures, dimly visible behind the great bars. Voices rose and a giant light began its swing toward the gate.

Too late. A flash in the darkness, and then the high arc of something bright and sputtering. And then a roar, and in the beam of the searchlight the gate itself, lifting now from its foundations and tottering.

It fell in a cloud of dust, amid the shrieks of wounded men. There was the steady blast of pellet guns and the purple flashes of the smaller rays.

"Now!" Stuart called.

The Richards brothers were already on their way. He watched them dash to the wall, merge with its shadow. Then they were up and running again. They came back in a flying leap and hit the dirt and stayed there as the wall itself erupted.

And now there was no need for orders. Stuart led the charge, and be-

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hind him came the rest, all of them racing for the great gap in the masonry.

No time for thinking now, just run, for through the gap the field was clearly visible, and on that field was a slender silver ship. Then they were through the gap and the ship only a few hundred yards away.

And now the Martians had come awake. They were deserting the gate, cutting back onto the field, as they realized their opponents' actutal goal.

Stuart was down on one knee, dimly aware that beside him there were others. Still unfamiliar with their stolen weapons, they fired blindly but steadily.

A Martian went down, then another. The size of the attacking force threw them off balance and they faltered, fell back. And then were hit from the rear by the group which had blasted the main gate.

It was turning into a rout. Stuart was up and running again. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that the defenders were being reorganized, but the chances were against their making it in time. The ship was close.

Then, one of the doors swung open and in the doorway, outlined by interior lights, stood a scrawny figure with a wizened, monkey face. Dion, Stuart thought.

The figure waved, yelled, "Come on!"

And then—disaster.

FROM OUT of nowhere, the Martians seemed to spring. Suddenly, there was a blast of fire from behind, and a man near Stuart went down.

Stuart whirled, fired blindly. And saw racing toward him a mass of men at least a hundred strong. Through the gap in the wall they poured, and now the tables were turned. Near Stuart another figure fell, then another.

His mind grasped the situation at once. These were the ones who had gone up to the hills. Finding nothing, they had probably left a guard, the main body coming back. And had seen the signs of battle in time to get into the fray.

Everywhere now there were men shouting, screaming. The whole thing had turned into a wild melee. There was no use running, for now there was no place to run. Only one thing remained, to make it as costly a victory as possible, to go down fighting.

But Stuart had reckoned without Dion. Unheeded by either side, the patrol ship had lifted slightly and swung around. Now, the area of battle lay under the ship's heaviest guns.

Without warning, they blasted. Waves of sound overwhelmed Stuart's ears, making his head reel. Glare blinded him, and for a moment he stood helpless.

Then, he could see again. The rear ranks of Martians were gone. Only those in the front were left. And now they were too close for Dion to chance another blast.

For a minute it was hand to hand, short sword against short sword. And then the Martians fell back.

The ship dropped between the two groups, screening off the Earthmen. Again the doors were open, and this time there were but three strides needed to reach them.

Stuart worked like a madman, shoving others through. There was a jam and he got up above it by swinging into the ship. He hauled, pulled, yanked them up bodily.

And then the last one was in and the doors swung shut. A surge of power shook the ship and it tilted sharply. It lifted, seeming to tug at fetters that held it back. And then the fetters dropped and it was free and soaring.

For the first time in six hundred years, of their own volition, of their

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own free will, Earthmen sailed the skies above Earth.

AT TWO hundred thousand feet, a whole squadron of small fighters swam into the view plates. Dismay clutched at Stuart's heart. It looked like Mars would have the last laugh.

Racing into the control room, he found Dion watching the small viewer with apparent disinterest. Completely at ease with the array of instruments, Dion gave them but a glance before turning to Stuart.

"Don't look so worried," the emaciated man grinned. "They won't get within fifty thousand feet of us. I had time to do some work on this baby."

He reached out for an improvised switch and cut it in. Instantly, there was a whine of fresh power that sent Stuart staggering back. He regained balance quickly enough to see the Martian fighters dwindling on the viewer.

"And that's just part of it," Dion grinned. He chortled gleefully. "I was too puny for hard work, so they taught me to fix motors. Bet they're sorry now."

"Not half as sorry as they're going to be."

"You got plans?"

"We didn't do this for a ride. What chance has a small fighter, another patrol ship or a freighter against us?"

"None, with the speed we've got." Suddenly Dion's face lit up. "Hey!"

"One at a time," Stuart told him. "We'll keep picking them off. Eventually have enough to tackle a battle cruiser. Meanwhile, the organization on Earth will keep growing, keep supplying more men."

He shrugged. It was a big dream, but at least he had seen it grow from even less than that. Someday, this small patrol ship would be part of a great privateer fleet, this handful of men would be the nucleus of an army.

A big dream, with an infinite number of details to be filled in, he reminded himself. And the first of them should be the checking of the casualty list.

Coming out of the control room and into the crew's quarters, he found Ben Crag already busy tallying off the men. Molly Pitch was tearing a strip of cloth to use as a bandage for a flesh wound. Crag finished his tally as Stuart walked up to him.

"We lost six," Crag told him. "Not too bad."

"Not too bad," Stuart agreed. It was better than he had hoped for.

But Ben Crag's homely countenance was twisted in lines that foretold worse news yet to come. Stuart watched him, suddenly aware of a sinking feeling inside himself, and as his eyes widened in an unspoken query, Ben Crag nodded.

"One of them was Loa," he said.

HE KNEW he should pull himself together. For without him there could be no dream, no realization. Without a leader there was simply no spark, nothing to bind together a group of slaves and give them the hope they needed.

But try as he would, Stuart could not shake off his depression. Without knowing it, he had always placed Loa at the center of his own personal dream. And now that she was gone, the dream had no meaning for him.

"Listen, Reb," Crag pleaded, "you've got to pull out of this. It's got every one down, seeing you mope. The men are beginning to act worried and scared."

"I know. But I just can't help it. I'd like to be heroic and put up a front. But it would be a lie, and everyone would know it." He

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shrugged. "I thought it was that liquor that made me hit the Martian. But it wasn't. It was Loa. Behind everything I've thought and done since then, there's always been Loa."

"I know. I know. But man! This is bigger than Loa, bigger than any of us."

Crag waved a massive arm at the communications set in the corner. It had been babbling away ever since their takeoff, with no one paying much attention to it. Now, for the first time, Stuart listened.

"They still can't believe it," Crag said. "They're going wild, wondering just what happened. Mars keeps demanding more information and not getting it."

He shook Stuart roughly. "And this is just the beginning! What about all those plans you had? Hundreds of years Earth's waited for a Reb Stuart. You can't—"

He broke off suddenly. There had been a change in the steady chatter of communications. Something was happening, something that might be important.

"Clear all channels!" a harsh voice was saying. "Clear all channels! This is the battle cruiser Setrim calling Intelligence Mars!"

"Proceed," came the reply. "Proceed, Setrim."

The message came over in the clipped style affected by military men since time immemorial.

"Report on completion of Instruction 3: Left Memfas immediately on receipt of instruction and proceeded to scene of action. Time elapsed, eight minutes.

"We found action concluded, with loss of one small patrol ship, Dron, Class Four. Enemy left five dead. One prisoner taken alive and unarmed.

"Prisoner is believed completely cognizant of future plans of subversive Earth organization. Therefore, have taken her aboard—"

"Her!" Crag blurted. "It must be Loa!"

"Quiet!" Stuart commanded.

"—and will proceed directly to headquarters on Course Seven." There was a pause—then, "Await further instructions."

"No instructions. Continue on course."

IN THE SILENCE that followed, Stuart's head reeled. Loa was alive! But there was no happiness in that thought. She'd be better off dead than going to the fate that awaited her. There would be interrogation, and what that interrogation would be like, Stuart could well imagine.

Through a fog, Stuart heard Ben Crag yell, "Dion!"

The wizened little man came in, his bright eyes alert and questioning. "What's the matter?"

"Suppose we wanted to get on something called Course Seven. Could we do it?"

"Sure," Dion nodded. "Except for takeoff and landing and maneuvers, all travel between Earth and Mars is on nine set channels. You just flick a switch to get on the one you want."

"Then get us on Seven," Crag commanded.

"Hold it!" Stuart cut in. He at last understood what Crag was driving at. "You're crazy, Ben! We can't tackle a battle cruiser."

"We can and we will." That was Molly Pitch.

But Stuart was adamant. "No. We wouldn't have a chance. I don't care about myself, but we can't throw away nineteen lives and this ship for a mere gesture at saving one girl."

"Stop thinking about Loa. And about yourself," Molly snorted. "When they get Loa up there, they'll

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make her talk. They'll find out the name of every group leader who remained behind. They'll squash our organization before it has a chance to spread. If they ever get Loa on Mars, we're licked. We might just as well be dead."

Stuart would have argued, but Molly and Ben were already calling for a vote. There was a show of hands. And after that, there was no use arguing. It was unanimous.

"All right," Stuart said. "Course Seven." He looked at Dion. "Can we outrun them?"

"Yeah, but not outgun them. We couldn't even dent their hull. But," he shrugged as though it didn't matter, "that's your worry."

IT WAS A chance in a million, but it was all the chance they had. As Dion had said, their guns couldn't dent a cruiser's impervalloy hull. Only subterfuge remained.

For all Stuart knew, Akrim might be aboard the Setrim. In that case, this small ship would run into a blast of fire that would turn it into a lump of molten metal. But there was always the chance that Akrim was not aboard, that he was too busy even to be listening to communications which had been silent for almost an hour.

"Calling the Setrim," Stuart said. He took a deep breath and started over. "Calling the Setrim."

"Yes?" came the reply.

"Akrim, governor of Blurij, requesting permission to overtake and come aboard for questioning of prisoner."

There was a long silence, long enough for a consultation with the Setrim's commander to have taken place. Then, at last, the curt, "Permission granted."

It might be a trick, a trap. But there was no time to think about that. Within minutes, the five-hundred-foot length of the Setrim appeared on the viewer, a silvery cylinder that would have close to a hundred men inside.

"How do we handle it?" Stuart asked.

"They'll use magnetic grapples to haul us close and glue our hatch to theirs," Dion told him.

"Their hatch opens inward, same as ours?"

"Yeah."

Stuart's eyes were beginning to glow with a tawny light. "Good! We'll surprise them. We've got a chance."

"You're crazy," Dion said calmly.

Stuart laughed. This was the kind of man he liked. This was the kind they needed, the kind who'd take up a lost cause and fight it out. And because of that, no cause could ever be totally lost.

"What's the inside of a cruiser like?" he asked.

"Same as this, only bigger. And only eighty, ninety more men. That's all."

"Never mind. Suppose we're grappled, our hatches open, and you kick our motors over. Would we tear loose?"

"Maybe. But I don't think so."

"Then watch it. When I give the signal, just a slight kick. Enough to jar them."

Then, he left Dion to get the rest of the men ready. He found them checking over their guns, running fingers over the edges of their swords.

"Just about set," Ben Crag said. He swiped wickedly at the air with his sword.

"Save your strength," Stuart warned jokingly. He turned to Molly. "You've worked on these gun mounts. Can we get one loose in time?"

"Sure. Just retract them and take off three bolts."

She pulled a lever and one of the port guns slid back, the aperture seal-

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ing automatically. Several twists, and she had a bolt free, then another.

"Better give me a hand," Molly said. "It's heavy."

Stuart grabbed it as it came loose. Four feet long and with a double casing. Impervious to heat, with no recoil whatever. Only one thing wrong; it weighed, as nearly as Stuart could tell, two hundred and fifty pounds.

"Here," Ben Crag said. He took it from Stuart, swung it lightly, cradled it in his arms and laughed.

"What a surprise for them!" he gloated.

And then it was time. Dion's voice came over the speaker, calling them to the hatch, warning them to brace themselves. On the viewer, the Setrim already loomed large; another minute and Dion had swung in close enough so the cruiser could not have used its heavy guns had it wanted.

Time was suspended, motion seemed to stop. Dion's voice crackled: "They've got their grapples out. Watch it."

A slight jar as the grapples took hold. There was the feeling of motion, gentle hands supporting the ship. Then, a scraping along the hull as the hatches sealed over each other.

Stuart had their own hatch already unlocked. He swung it open and directly opposite him the Setrim's hatch swung inward.

"Kick it!" Stuart yelled.

Dion kicked it. There was a sickening lurch.

BRACED though they were, the shock was terrible. Grimly they fought to stay upright, waited for the terrible hiss that would mean the seal had broken.

But the seal stayed fast. And now they had regained their balance. From the Setrim's hatch there were screams and shouts. The jolt had flung the Setrim and its small parasite completely over, and any man not firmly anchored to something solid must have been fearfully buffeted.

Stuart was already racing across the hatchways. A face appeared opposite him, shouted a warning. The Setrim's hatch started to close.

But it was too late. Stuart had a foot in the doorway. He shoved his handgun blindly around the great hatch and sprayed flame. More shrieks, and the hatch gave way slightly.

Then, Ben Crag's mighty shoulder hit it and flung it inward all the way. A ray from a small gun curled around the edge and Crag shoved Stuart aside.

"Let me handle this," he grunted.

A geyser of flame erupted from the huge gun in his hands, flame that swept the corridor of the Setrim free of Martians and boiled through them and past them toward the control room of the cruiser. Walls glowed cherry red, forcing the Earthmen into the middle of the corridor as they charged forward.

Reinforcements appeared, spurred on by shouts from behind them. But no officer's command gave immunity from the terrible weapon in Ben Crag's hands. The reinforcements turned to charred flesh.

In the control room, a bejewelled Martian shouted insane orders at his communications officer, trying to get through a call for help. Crag swung the giant gun toward them and Stuart pushed him aside.

"Not in here!" The control room was the heart of the ship. Blast it, and the Setrim would be useless.

It was only a moment's delay, but it gave the Setrim's commander a chance to run. He was through a doorway at the other end of the room before Stuart could reach him.

Behind them there were the sounds

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of battle, but Stuart's mind was fixed on the man who ran ahead. There was no weapon the Setrim could use to save itself now. No weapon except possibly one. And that was Loa!

The Martian slid around a corner, managed to reach a barred door as Stuart snapped a shot at him. The shot missed its mark and the door banged open. Before Stuart could fire again, the door was swinging shut.

Twenty feet to cover, and only a fraction of a second to cover it. Stuart flung himself forward in a desperate leap.

His body hit, widening the tiny crack between door and lock. And from behind the door, there came the grunt of a man whose strength was being overtaxed.

NOW, IT WAS a question of brute force. Neither man could see his opponent. Neither dared to fire around the door for fear that even a momentary letup on his part would give victory to the other.

But for Stuart, there was no doubt. He had to win, he had to force that door open. And he was winning! The crack was widening, imperceptibly at first, and then steadily.

And then the door swung suddenly wide, sending Stuart plunging blindly across the room. Loa was there, he had guessed right about that. For the fraction of a second, he had a glimpse of her out of the corner of his eye.

But there was no time to look. In a single continuous motion he was twisting, rolling over and over as he tried desperately to avoid the tongue of flame that followed him.

Nor could he fire back. Shooting blindly, he had as much chance of hitting Loa as of hitting his opponent. As he came out of his roll, Stuart saw the commander take aim carefully.

There was no time to fire. There was only time to continue the movement of his arm and let go of the gun. It sailed out, sailed true and straight into the Martian's face.

And right behind the gun came Stuart. A shot lanced past him, and then he was on top of the Setrim's commander. His hand clamped on a thick wrist and twisted. A gun fell with a clatter to the floor.

Long fingers gouged at Stuart's eyes, forcing his head back. The edge of a palm sliced at his unprotected throat. He had to let loose his own grip, had to give ground.

The two broke. And when they came at each other again, the Martian had his sword in his hand. Stuart ducked, whirled wide and around the other, got his own sword out of its scabbard.

And now it was Stuart who was on the defensive. He was no match at all for the accomplished swordsman who faced him. Foot by foot he was driven back, forced into untenable positions with the leering green face close to his own.

He slashed wildly, felt steel hit steel. And this time, the Martian gave ground. Stuart's heart leaped. In sheer strength, he was superior. If he could devote all his energies to defense, he would wear the other down.

Again the swords clashed, and again it was the Martian who gave way. His wrist was not as flexible as it had been. He pressed close, battling grimly to get home the one thrust that was needed.

And could not. Stuart had given up trying to reach him, was concentrating solely on parrying each thrust at arm's length. Another time the swords met, and again. The Martian seeemed to weaken. He withdrew slightly and Stuart heaved a sigh of relief.

"Look out!" Loa screamed.

Like a dagger, the short sword flew through the air, flung in a last des-

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perate effort. Like a dagger, it sought Stuart's throat. Caught totally unprepared, he seemed certain to die.

BUT REB STUART was no ordinary man. His reflexes were more feline than human. In midair, his body twisted, his head jerked aside. Only the hilt of the flying sword touched his throat as it sped by.

And now it was the Martian who could not alter course in time. Already charging forward, he could not stop. Eyes wide with horror, he came full tilt onto the point of Stuart's sword, and his own weight drove it into and through him.

Then, Loa was in his arms and he was holding her tight. There had been some questioning already, Stuart saw. Her skin was bruised and raw in numerous places.

"I wouldn't tell them anything," Loa whispered. "They were going to—"

Stuart's kiss cut off the rest of it. He was still holding her, his lips glued to hers, when Crag and Molly burst into the room.

"We got 'em all!" Ben shouted. "Every one of them! This whole damn cruiser is ours!"

Only a moment of jubilee when he and Molly embraced Loa, and then they had to recount every detail of the battle for the Setrim. It had been a vicious battle, but a short one.

"And just think!" Crag exulted. "A battle cruiser!"

Stuart was thinking. With this ship and what Dion could do to it, there was nothing that could touch them, nothing that could beat them.

Freighters would fall like apples from a tree into their hands. Fighting ships would run or be defeated. Ship by ship, the fleet would be built. And all the while, preparations would continue on Earth. Until, one day—

His thoughts broke off as he stared through a porthole. Earth was visible, two of its continents clearly defined as the planet swung on its orbit.

Stuart pointed through the porthole and the others followed his gaze. He finished his thought aloud: "Until, one day, Earth will be free."

They nodded in silent amen.

OUT OF CONTROL

By Merritt Linn

THE ADVOCATES of guided missiles, who picture any future war as simply a push-button affair, really must modify their ideas, because, in spite of the wonders being accomplished in the world of remotely controlled planes and rockets, certain facts thrust up their recalcitrant heads. One of these is the simple one that most guided missiles fall into either of two categories: pre-set and guided, the former term referring to "V-2" types of rockets which, when once launched, are beyond control. The second term refers to the real trouble-maker.

A radio or radar-guided missile is subject to one cold limitation stemming directly from its wonderful conception. Radio or radar is a two-way proposition, and what one controls another can jam; since the radio and radar spectra are limited, no one can with impunity simply blast an opponent by remote control.

As a result, systems are being worked out which call for stronger concentration on the artillery-like "pre-set" missiles in preference to "guided" missiles. You may not be able to guide or control the former when once they're launched—but neither can the enemy! In other words, the danger of boomeranging is eliminated.

As for guided missiles which do not depend upon radio or radar, but use heat or infrared or the like, a similar problem of boomeranging exists which cannot be countered save by some radical developments of which no one has an inkling. This seems unlikely so that, while missile development will show marvelous strides in the next few decades, it will not be ultrapowerful, and the familiar weapons of today will still be in use.

Among "guided missiles", with certain limitations, the "airplane" still has one big advantage. Its speed may be limited, its load may be limited—but the enemy can't control it!

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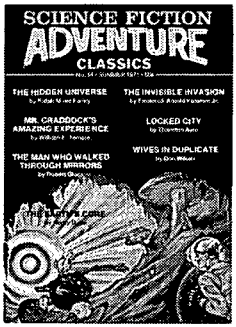

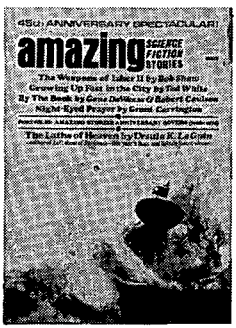

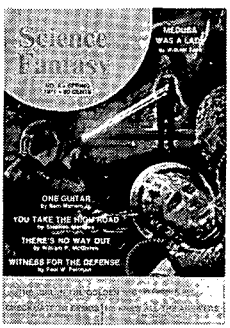

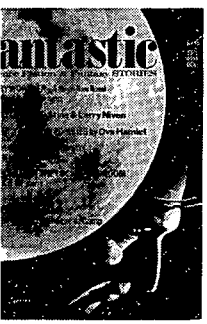

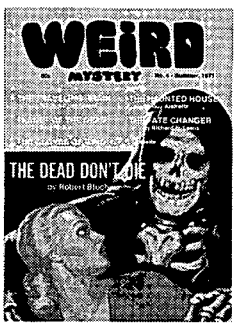

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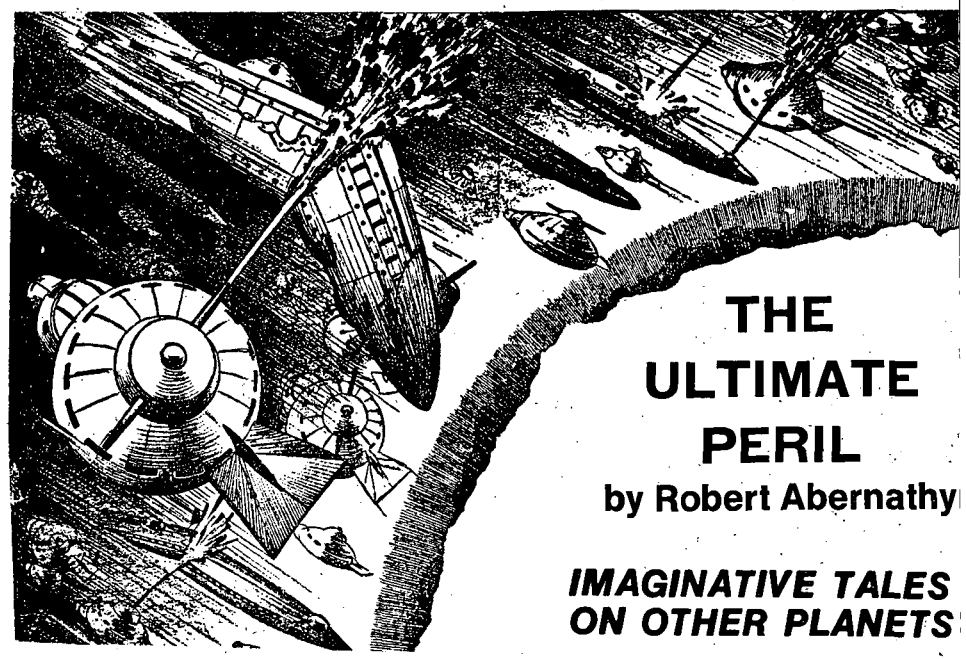

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